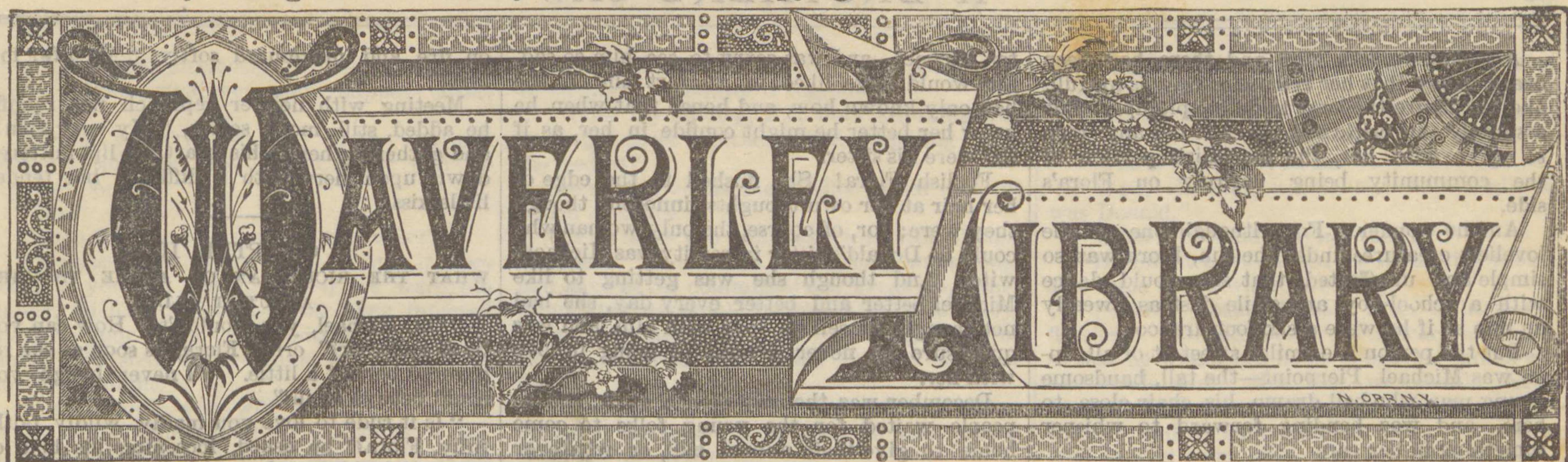


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"THERE WAS THE SPECTER OF ANOTHER MICHAEL, WHICH WAS NOT HIMSELF!"

A Brother's Sin; or, Flora's Forgiveness.

BY RACHEL BERNHARDT.

CHAPTER I.

A BRAW WOOER.

In a comfortable old-fashioned room of a house in the suburbs of a small county town, a little group of people were seated round the fire on Christmas Day, 1860.

The group consisted of an elderly lady, whose face bore the traces of past beauty, and also of past sorrow.

Her countenance was serene—even cheerful; but there was a half-pathetic expression in her eyes as they looked into the red blaze, where maybe she saw the faces of those she had loved and lost; and her thoughts seemed to be so far away, or rather above the others, that she started when they addressed her, and was with difficulty brought to understand the subject they were discussing.

On the left of Mrs. Chester sat a young girl of about eighteen, so like the elder lady, that you seemed to see in her all that the other had once been—as if she were a portrait of the mother, taken in the first flush of loveliness and youth.

And she was very beautiful—Flora Chester. They say that no human face was ever perfect, and yet you hardly knew where to find a fault in hers.

A jealous woman here and there had been heard to say that her red under-lip was too full, and her figure the least trifle too plump. But assuredly this critic had never found any men to agree with her, the masculine portion of the community being entirely on Flora's side.

And no wonder. For, although one of the loveliest creatures under the sun, Flora was so simple and unaffected that she would dance with a school-boy, and smile just as sweetly on him as if he were a six-foot dragoon.

But the person she smiled sweetest of all upon was Michael Pierpoint—the tall, handsome young man who had drawn his chair close to hers, and was bending forward to whisper something in her ear.

The quick blush that followed his words, the bashful downward look, were pretty plain proofs to the initiated that Flora's heart was not in her own keeping, although she might not be conscious of the fact herself.

Nor indeed was she. If questioned, she would have answered candidly that she liked Michael very much; and Donald, too—Donald being the other's twin brother. But then it was surely natural to like people who were kind to you, and neither Michael nor Donald could do too much for his lovely neighbor.

The two brothers resembled each other so closely that Flora never could understand afterward how she had come to make any distinction in her feelings toward them.

But who ever did understand the reason of their own sympathies or antipathies.

Love comes like Dian's kiss—unasked, unsought; and Flora, who had been a very child hitherto, awoke suddenly to the consciousness that she was a woman, and that there was something more for her to do than to trifle through the sunny hours, following every fancy that came into her pretty head. Not that she had ever meant to be idle and useless, but there seemed no work for her to do.

Mrs. Chester had a handsome income for a widow lady, and Flora had no need even to mend her gloves unless so inclined. So it was hardly her fault if she seemed frivolous when she was not so.

But the arrival of Michael and Donald Pierpoint at Ayshe changed not only her feelings, but her whole life.

They were the nephews and supposed heirs of a rich old bachelor living in the town, and he had invited them to stay a couple of months with him on leaving college, in order that he might talk over their future.

They had each of them a moderate competence, but being enterprising and ambitious, were anxious to make this moderate competence into a large fortune.

Mr. Pierpoint, who thought it only right and proper that they should work while they were young, encouraged them in this idea, and promised to do his best to help them carry out their wishes.

At a party in the neighborhood two days after their arrival at Ayshe, Michael and Donald met Flora Chester (who had recently come to reside near Ayshe), and seemed to be mutually and warmly struck by her beauty and sweet, genial manners.

There had always been perfect confidence between them, and at first they discussed her rapturously together; but after a while both became reticent; and knowing his brother to be somewhat fickle, Michael thought that Donald had quite forgotton his sudden fancy for Flora.

Donald's conduct favored this idea. He no longer singled Flora out at the parties where they met, but rather seemed to shun her, standing aloof with a grave, preoccupied air, instead of joining in the pleasures of the evening.

Flora, who was given to weaving romances, fancied that he had been disappointed in love, and would smile at him sympathetically as she flashed by in Michael's arms to the music of the band.

He was the newest young man she knew—of

ter Michael—and was sorry to see him so sad. She would have liked to comfort him if she had only known how, and hoped that when he knew her better he might confide in her, as if she were his sister.

Foolish Flora! She flushed to the edge of her hair at her own thoughts, innocent though they were; for, of course, the only woman who could be Donald's sister in reality was Michael's wife. And though she was getting to like Michael better and better every day, she had not thought herself in love with him, and was quite sure he never dreamt of being in love with her.

December was the gay month at Ayshe, as people waited for the young folks to come home to give their annual ball, or whatever form of entertainment they preferred.

Of course Flora went to every thing, this being her first season; and, of course, every one asked the twin brothers, not only because they were very presentable partners, but also to please Mr. Pierpoint, who, as the rich man of the town, was greatly looked up to in Ayshe.

On this account Flora met Michael and Donald so often that it was impossible to keep on formal terms with them, especially as Mrs. Chester was so pleased with them both that she invited them to call; and they got into the habit, at last, of running in at all hours, and sharing any meal that was going on at the moment.

Very often, too, Michael happened to be there when they were starting for a drive; and as he was such a good whip, and the cob was apt to be restive in cold weather, it was very natural for him to take the reins.

Flora always sat beside him on the front seat, and they had pleasant talks on all subjects but one, and that Michael dared not approach, for she looked so innocent and bashful, he feared to scare her, and lose all the ground he had so laboriously gained.

And yet the suspense tried him so cruelly that often, as he lay down at night, he made a half-vow to end it on the morrow, and learn his fate. He was very valiant all the next morning, but no sooner did he catch sight of Flora in the distance than he felt his courage oozing away, and looked and felt as shy as she did.

But the Christmas parties would afford him an opening, he said to himself; and perhaps he should be able to find out something about her feelings in the meantime. So he would wait.

But this was Christmas Eve, and still Michael had not spoken. If he had loved Flora less, he would have been bolder; as it was, he felt so cowardly, that he was ashamed of himself. But he knew that if Flora refused him his life would be wretched forever and aye, and therefore it was natural he should shrink from the ordeal.

But Flora was looking so specially lovely to-night, Michael's eyes, as they feasted on her face, told his secret so plainly, the girl could not but understand, and with the revelation of his secret came also the knowledge of her own.

Poor child! she was so troubled, abashed, and joyful all at once, that she hardly knew how to bear herself. Her cheeks were burning, her hands cold, and her heart beat so fast she thought every moment she should faint. At last she slipped away on some pretext, and once in her own room, dropped into a chair, and covering her face with her hands, burst into tears; just like any other foolish girl.

But she dared not long indulge in this luxury, for she would have to return to the drawing-room, and did not want to take a pair of red eyes with her. So, after a while, she bathed her face, smoothed her hair, and then stole down-stairs with a timid step.

The lamp in the hall was burning low, and Flora never dreamt that any one was there besides herself until she felt her hand taken suddenly between two warm palms, and Michael Pierpoint bent forward, with his face

on fire, and murmured softly, "My life! my love!"

Meeting with neither reproach nor rebuff, he added, still more softly, "My very own!" and gathering her to his heart, his lips fluttered down upon hers with a diffident but tender little kiss.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT THE RICH MAN OF AYSHE THOUGHT ABOUT IT ALL.

"Oh, Michael, you shouldn't! How can you be so rude, sir?" cried Flora, as soon as she recovered herself a little. "I never thought you could behave so ill!"

"Is it rude to love you madly, wildly, faithfully, Flora?" he asked, loosening his hold of her, and looking at her with impassioned eyes. "I am very sorry I forgot myself, but you are so charming!"

"Even if that were true, it is no excuse," she replied, trying to speak severely. "If other people did such things—"

"I should knock them down, of course," answered Michael, who felt his pulses quiver at the very idea. "But then you don't, surely, class me with 'other people'?"

Flora looked down, and her under-lip quivered. To have saved her life she could not have uttered a word. Still, her silence was not discouraging, somehow, and Michael ventured to draw nearer again.

"You see, Flora," he went on, "you are so different to other people in my eyes, and I love you so dearly! I know it was very wrong of me to behave as I did just now, but I could not help myself; and will submit to any punishment you like to impose. You are still a child, and do not know what men suffer who love as I love you."

Still she kept silence; and her face being averted, Michael could not see the rosy blush that suffused it, or the tremulous little smile hovering about her lips, and grew frantic with fear lest he had offended past forgiveness.

"Oh, Flora!" he cried, "you cannot have a cruel heart, you who look so gentle; and it would be very unmerciful to condemn a man altogether for one fault. I never failed in proper respect to you before, did I?"

"No," she murmured.

"And you do, you must, believe that I revere as much as I love you," he went on. "If it were not so, how could I want you for my wife?"

His wife! How Flora thrilled through and through at the sweet name which was her great ambition; and yet she had not the courage to reassure him until he said in a voice so broken by agitation that she hardly recognized it again, "I see you do not like me, Flora, and cannot bear to tell me so outright. I will not trouble you any more. You were my first and will be my only love; and miserable, despairing, as I am now, I would rather have lost you than never have known you at all, for my future must needs be better, if sadder, for this experience. Good-by, Flora. You will not surely deny me one last shake of the hand? I must leave Ayshe at once—this very night!"

Then the woman in Flora conquered her maiden diffidence, and, turning round to him she said, with great confusion, but firmly too, "You must not leave Ayshe at all, Michael, for I—I want you here, with me."

I am afraid Michael repented his first offense at this, but then circumstances do alter cases, of course. Flora was not the least offended this time, although she looked very red too.

"I never heard the Christmas chimes sound so sweetly before," murmured Michael, after a long and rapturous silence. "Do you know, I shall never hear them in all the years to come without a thrill? They will seem to have had so much to do with our happiness."

"Let us go out a minute, and listen," said Flora. "It is so stifling here!"

"Flora, dearest, may I speak to Mrs. Chester to-night?" Michael detained her to ask.

"Oh, no; please, please wait till to-mor-

row!" she cried, anxiously. "Let us have one happy night, whatever may happen afterward."

"Flora, you frighten me! Have you any reason to suppose that Mrs. Chester will refuse her consent?"

"No."

"Then why do you speak in this way?"

"Because one can never tell; and it does seem, as you said just now, as if we were too happy, Michael. You see, you have infected me with your fears," she added, with a faint smile. "I shall be dreaming of all sorts of horrors to-night."

"Nay, Flora, you will dream of me and of my love. This is only the beginning of our life-long happiness, I hope; and if we trust each other, there can be nothing to fear. Hark to the chimes—how clearly they echo my words, 'Nothing to fear!' We could not have chosen a better time for our betrothal, for those very bells will ring us out of church on our happy bridal day."

"And when will that be?" she shyly said.

"Very soon, Flora, I hope. We have nothing to wait for. I am not rich, but have sufficient for us both; and when I have a second and dearer self to work for, shall never rest till I have made a home worthy of my wife."

"I am not ambitious, Michael. I only want your love."

"And you would marry me now, at once, Flora?" he asked, eagerly.

"I would if I ought, Michael; but we must think of poor mamma a little. Our happiness must not make us selfish and inconsiderate; and, you see, it is hard for her to lose me so soon. I have not been home from school more than six months, and she has nobody but me."

"Still, she must have expected you to marry, and leave her."

"Some day, but not so soon as this; and I know how she used to look forward to having a companion. If papa were alive it wouldn't matter so much, but now she will be all alone when I am gone. I wouldn't be without my mother for all the world!"

"But I want you the most, my darling."

"I am not at all sure of that. But I see I may break mamma's heart if I like."

"Indeed you may not, for that would only be an indirect way of getting at mine."

"How selfish men are!"

"I am afraid men and women both are selfish when they are in love. It is a part of the complaint."

"You seem to be very experienced in such matters, sir," said Flora, bridling.

Michael laughed.

"I only know what you have taught me."

"Oh! for shame, Michael! How could I teach you what I didn't know myself?"

"You have known how to make fools of us all, Flora, at any rate."

Flora swept him a courtesy.

"Thank you for the compliment, Mr. Pierpoint, and don't think me very severe if I venture to hint that in a great many instances Nature had saved me the trouble."

"It is you who ought to be ashamed now, Flora, for you are turning the tables on me with a vengeance. How can you say such wicked things while listening to the chimes which preach of peace and good-will? Hark, now!" he added, more seriously, as he drew her shawl closer about her shoulders, and stepped out into the moonlit garden. "Was there ever any thing sweeter or more solemn? One could almost fancy one heard the angels singing a soft accompaniment behind the stars. Do you know what I was thinking a moment ago, Flora?"

"What was it?"

"That we should do well to die now while our cup of happiness is full."

"Oh, Michael! what a sorrowful thought!"

"It sounds so, I know, but it is not really sorrowful, dearest, for those whom the gods love die young. There is a good deal of pain and grief in the world, and some of it might come to us."

"Even then we could surely meet it bravely, if we might encounter it together."

"True, my darling, if it were anything that we might meet together. But supposing death divided us?"

She shuddered as she nestled closer into his warm embrace.

"Why must you picture such terrible things, Michael? We are both of us young and strong, and have never committed any great sin, either of us, that we should be punished so severely. It is surely best to look upon the bright side of things, and you have made me feel so very sad."

"Why, dear Flora? Would you not rather choose to be with me in heaven, than parted from me on earth?"

"But what should part us, Michael?"

"I don't know. Indeed, what should?" he added, after the manner of a man who is trying to argue down some obtrusive thought. "You say you love me, Flora?"

"You know I do, Michael."

"And let what may happen, you will be true to me, dear?" he went on. "I don't doubt you for a second, believe me; and can't see what should come between us; and yet, somehow, I need this assurance."

"Then you do doubt me, Michael."

"Heaven forbid!" he ejaculated. "But who desires also fears, according to the Latin line; and I cannot help trembling at my own exceeding happiness, for it does not seem as if it could be real. This morning I dared not even flatter myself that you cared for me, and even now can scarcely believe it. I am so unworthy of this great honor and happiness. If it had been Donald now—"

"Donald, indeed!" she exclaimed, with a petulant movement of her pretty chin on his broad shoulder. "I like Donald very much, of course; but—well, I don't know—he is always so grave."

"And you don't like grave people, Flora; is that what you mean?"

"I don't like a man who is never grave, at any rate. But Donald always looks sad. I do pity him very much, Michael, because I am sure he must have some trouble. But though I am really quite fond of him," she added, quickly, as if fearing to be misunderstood, "I should never love him best of all."

"And you love me best of all, Flora?"

Flora was mute.

"Mrs. Chester comes a very long way before me, I'll wager."

"She ought," replied Flora, the more decidedly that she was not at all sure she did. "She has loved me for eighteen years, and you have only loved me for a few weeks."

"And yet I would die for you," he answered, with a sincerity there was no mistaking. "And could Mrs. Chester do more?"

"Don't let us talk about poor mamma any longer, Michael, or I shall never have courage to be engaged at all. Look! What is that?" she added, suddenly, as she clung closer to him, and pointed toward the shrubs with a terrified air. "I am sure I saw somebody watching us."

"Nonsense, child!" he answered, caressing her tenderly. "Who even knows that we are here?"

"They might have heard our voices."

"In that case, I should hope they would have had the manners to retire!" he answered, loudly.

"Oh, don't, please!" she said, in a timid tone. "Supposing it were a robber?"

"What then, my love?"

"He might be angry, and attack you."

Michael laughed in spite of himself.

"You dear little coward, what would be the use? I haven't a farthing in my pocket."

"He wouldn't know that."

"He might guess it, seeing me in evening dress, for robbers are uncommonly knowing, let me tell you. Besides, I am so close to the house, that I could have assistance in a moment by calling out, which would not exactly

suit Mr. Robber. But let me go and give him a piece of my mind."

"Oh, no, Michael; I won't let you, indeed, for I am quite sure there is some one there."

"Was it any one you knew?"

"Well," she said, reluctantly, "I thought it was Donald."

"What! Donald playing the spy?"

"He might have missed us from the room, and come to see where we were."

"Possibly," said Michael, after a little reflection. "Donald has great delicacy and tact, so that he would not have joined us unless we had made him. Not that we should have thought him one too many, Flora, should we? Donald and I have always been very fast friends, and I am sure that no one will sympathize in our happiness as he will."

"I, too, am quite sure of that," she said, cordially. "But we must go in now, Michael. Mamma will be wondering what has become of us."

"One minute, and you shall go, dearest."

And he gathered her to his heart with a tight strain, kissing her with a rapturous, yearning tenderness, almost as if they were about to part for a long while. At last, he loosened his hold, drew her hand through his arm, and led her back into the house, with a wonderful bloom on her cheeks, that came, no doubt, of the frosty air.

Mrs. Chester was leaning back in her chair, and sleeping tranquilly; Donald sat at the center table, with a newspaper close to his face. He moved it a little on one side, as they entered, hazarded one swift, scrutinizing glance into Flora's face, then appeared absorbed in his reading again.

Michael stooped his radiant countenance, so as to throw a shadow across the page, and said, gayly, "So, here you are, after all, old fellow! Flora fancied you were star-gazing in the shrubbery."

Donald shrugged his shoulders, and thereby, involuntarily, of course, shook off his brother's hand.

"I don't think it is exactly the weather for star-gazing," he answered, rather curtly. "Moreover, I never had much of a fancy that way. Won't you take my seat, Flora?"

"Why should I? There is plenty of room on the sofa."

"And room for two," put in Michael, who seemed to have no wish to conceal the fact that he considered this a great advantage. "I am not quite sure that we could not find a corner for you, old boy."

Donald shuddered convulsively ere he replied, in a hard, constrained voice, "Two are company, three are none. Besides, you have chilled me enough as it is."

"How?" And Michael looked up sharply.

"You brought in so much cold air with you."

"How could we be so careless, Flora?" said Michael, banteringly. "We have given Donald cold in his little finger. You would hardly believe that was the same lad who, last winter, crashed through the ice in a lake to rescue a little child he had never seen in his life before, would you, Flora?"

And he laid his hand once more on Donald's shoulder with an affectionate smile.

The young man colored.

"Pshaw!" he said. "You are so fond of harping on old strings, Michael! I shall wish I had left the child to its fate if I hear any more about it."

"You are cross to-night, Donald—that is the fact."

"Well, perhaps I am," he added, with a short laugh. "It is very churlish of me to show my temper before you, Flora, but I must trust to your kind heart for forgiveness this time, and promise not to offend any more."

Remembering Michael's oft-repeated prayer that she and Donald might be good friends, Flora held out her hand, saying very sweetly, "I am afraid I am often cross too, Donald, so we must be mutually forbearing, mustn't we? Come, how natural is twain, and the

chimes have stopped, let us sing some Christmas carols—unless mamma minds," she added, turning to Mrs. Chester, who was settling her cap in front of the glass.

"Why, my dear, I should like it, of course," was the ready reply. "You three sing so well together. Your voice is a tenor, Michael, isn't it?"

"So they tell me."

"And Donald's a base?"

"Yes, Donald's is a base, decidedly."

"So that, with Flora's soprano, you make an excellent trio," said Mrs. Chester, arranging herself on the couch again with an air of enjoyment and perfect ease that somehow felt like a reproach to Flora, knowing what a change the morrow must needs make in her feelings. "Come, young people, when are you going to begin? And, while you are singing, Benson shall make us some punch to warm us."

"To warm us?" echoed Michael, laughing. "I am afraid we must find another excuse, Mrs. Chester."

"You must, certainly," she said, glancing from one brother to the other with quickening interest and some surprise. "But you look frozen, Donald."

He moved abruptly out of her range of vision, responding, faintly, "I have had no exercise to-day, and that always makes me chilly. Don't mind me. I shall be all right in a minute or two."

Touched by something in his eyes, Mrs. Chester said, quite affectionately, "Come into my corner, Donald, and you will be out of the draught. I can't bear to see you look so wretched."

Donald laughed then.

"I am sure you are very kind to trouble about me, Mrs. Chester," he replied; but, instead of the seat she suggested, he helped himself to the chair opposite Flora's, and sat there moodily, with his head on his hands, taking no apparent interest in the conversation going on around him.

But when the punch came in, he jumped up to help it; and Michael noticed, with surprise, considering how abstemious his brother was as a rule, that he drank two glasses to every one he served out, while his face flushed, and his eyes grew bright and defiant.

"Love!" he sneered; "who believes in love? Only old-fashioned people, I trow. For my part, I am thankful to say I can suffice to myself."

Michael observed him uneasily.

"I don't believe you are any different to the rest of us in that respect," he said at last. "Indeed I have often heard you say that a man's life was incomplete until he had found a helpmate and dearer self."

"Ah! that was in my romantic days."

"And what has put such an abrupt end to all your romance?"

"Experience," answered Donald, gloomily. "That is the great disenchanter, you know."

"I don't believe you mean anything you are saying, Donald," said Michael, sharply; and he glanced significantly but furtively at the punch-bowl, as much as to indicate that Donald owed his strange opinions to that, and had better have nothing more to do with it.

Donald understood the hint, evidently; but it almost seemed as if some evil spirit possessed him to-night, for he stretched out his hand, and helped himself to another glass in the other's face.

Michael grew intolerably anxious at last. He had never yet seen Donald in the smallest degree excited by drink, and certainly the present prelude was not reassuring. To do him justice, his first thought was for Donald's character; and then he could not help reflecting how any indiscretion on his brother's part might damage him personally when he came to plead his cause with Mrs. Chester.

"She may fancy we are two wild lads together," he said to himself, "and refuse to trust me with Flora."

And then he glanced anxiously at the clock.

To his relief, it was on the stroke of eleven, and he had therefore a decent excuse for retiring.

"Come, Donald," he said, cheerfully; "uncle told us not to be late."

But Donald kept his seat obstinately.

"There's no hurry," he said. "Uncle will go to bed."

"Yes; but we shall keep the servants up."

"Never mind about the servants."

Mrs. Chester had not hitherto noticed anything peculiar in Donald's manner, but she looked up sharply at this; and if Michael had not intervened with some remark that diverted her attention, she must certainly have seen that something was wrong.

As it was, Michael, by dint of good generalship, managed to get him into the hall, when Donald seized hold of his hat, and darted out.

Michael waited to put on his great-coat before he followed, and then, the drawing-room door being ajar, what more natural than that he should take one little peep at Flora as she sat pensively gazing into the fire, unconscious of observation?

But Flora was looking so excessively lovely that the one little peep became a long one; and as Michael stepped out onto the terrace, he saw the shadowy outline of his brother's figure at the extreme end of the road leading directly away from Mr. Pierpoint's house.

"What is the lad up to to-night?" said Michael, aloud. "I believe he is daft. The punch certainly has got into his head. Donald, Donald!" he shouted; "come back! You are going the wrong way!"

Donald heard him, evidently, for he slightly turned his head; and was it the silvery moonlight that gave his face such a ghastly gleam? —for Michael had never seen him look like that before.

"Do you hear?" called Michael again. "This is tomfoolery, Donald! You will fall into the lake."

A horrible fear seized on Michael, and he felt his heart leap into his mouth. With a bound he cleared the hedge in front of him, and fell headlong into the ditch beyond, which fortunately, happened to be dry.

In a moment he had regained his feet, and was rushing on again with a long, steady stride. Michael had been a famous runner in his college days, and though he had got out of practice through his dalliance on Flora, the feeling of Donald's danger lent him wings, and he seemed to skim the ground rather than touch it.

He kept his eyes fixed on Donald, but he did not call to him any more. He began to understand that the lad was in that mood when opposition only added to the excitement that was consuming him, and that his one chance of saving him was to hold his peace until they were actually face to face.

A mist came over his sight, but when he dashed his hand across his eyes, and looked for Donald again, there was a gaping hole in the ice where the moonbeams shone brightest, and nothing more.

CHAPTER III.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

For one moment Michael was so overpowered by the horror of the situation that his energies were completely paralyzed, and he stood rooted to the spot, staring at the black hole into which Donald, his twin brother, and until lately the person he loved best in all the world, had disappeared.

But presently the life came back into his leaden limbs and faint pulses, and he sprung wildly toward the bank, dragging off his great-coat as he went.

He had very little hope of saving Donald, but at least he could try, even if he perished in the attempt. He would fain have lived for Flora; but if he must die for Donald, at least she would have no reason to blush in days to come for her first love.

She was so young that she would forget and

be happy; but if he left Donald to die, could he ever forget and be happy, even in Flora's arms?

"No; a thousand times, no!" was the emphatic answer that rose to his lips and forced itself through them.

"Donald has a right to my life, for he would give his as readily for me."

He turned his eyes momentarily toward Mrs. Chester's house, with a prayer and a blessing for his darling in his heart; and then was drawing back, ready to spring, when he saw Donald's head crash through the thin edge of the ice; and his brother said, in a hoarse but calm voice: "Don't come, Michael; I am on my feet, and shall get on very well."

"Gripe hold of my hand, old fellow," answered Michael, brokenly.

"There is no need, and the bank is slippery. Stop where you are, and I will join you in a minute."

"On your honor, Donald?"

"What do you mean? You don't suppose I shall stay here longer than I can help, do you?"

Michael was silent. He dared not speak out his thoughts until his brother stood safely beside him, for his face was the face of a desperate man, although his words were fair.

"I am afraid you will catch cold," he said, at last.

Donald laughed.

"The water is delightful. Look sharp, Michael; I am going to jump."

"Do take my hand, Donald," said his brother, imploringly, for he dared not trust him even yet. "You can't jump in your wet clothes."

"Nonsense!"

And with one bound Donald, who had the fictitious strength that comes of internal fever, cleared the bank, and laughed triumphantly in Michael's face.

"There! What did I tell you? You don't know what I am capable of yet."

"You are safe, at any rate, thank Heaven!" murmured Michael, gratefully. "Put on my coat, and let us get home as fast as we can. I am so afraid of your catching cold."

"No fear of that. I am as warm as a toast," replied Donald, jauntily. "Put on the great-coat yourself; it would stifle me."

"Donald, I beseech you!"

"Pshaw, Michael! You have been so much among women lately, that you have grown quite a fidget. Did you ever know me to catch cold yet?"

"No; but I never saw you in such a predicament before. How came you to fall into the lake?"

Donald regarded his brother with a strange, lowering look.

"That punch was so confoundedly strong," he said; "I think it must have got into my head. I meant to make straight for home."

Michael knew this was a falsehood—the first he had ever heard on his brother's lips, but deemed it expedient to appear to accept the explanation given.

"Ah, well," he said, cheerful enough as to tone, "accidents will occur in the best regulated families. But don't have anything to say to Benson's punch another time, for it is, I must own, a most potent liquor."

Donald walked along with his eyes on the ground, and did not speak again until they were close to Mr. Pierpoint's house, when he observed in an abrupt way, "What on earth did you want to come in after me for, Michael?"

"Why, do you think—"

"Pshaw! what is the use of being Quixotic?"

"None whatever; but there is some in being brotherly, I suppose?"

"My dear fellow, all that sort of thing is a snare and a delusion, you may depend upon it," answered Donald, in a hard, defiant tone.

"We fancy we can't do without affection when we are quite young; but as we get older, learn that it is simply a luxury, not a necessity."

"Anyhow, it is one of those luxuries that

are good for a man to treat himself to, it seems to me."

"Why?" asked Donald, sharply.

"Because love is a great softener."

"Or a great hardener," sneered Roland. "There is a reverse to the medal, you know."

"Possibly; but it is not usual with you to be looking out for it," replied his brother gravely. "But you are not like yourself anyway tonight, Donald, and that's the fact. When you have slept off Benson's punch, you will, I hope, take a more cheerful view of things in general."

They entered the house at this moment, and parted at the foot of the stairs—Michael staying to speak a few words to the old butler, and Donald going straight to his room. But when the former had been in bed for over an hour, he heard his brother still about, and wondered drowsily what could have happened that evening to disturb him so strangely, and make him so unlike his true self.

The first thing Michael did in the morning was to acquaint his uncle with his engagement to Flora Chester, and, to his delight, Mr. Pierpoint congratulated him most cordially.

"She is a good little girl," he said, "and will make you an excellent wife; only that, of course, you cannot marry yet."

"No, uncle? Why?" inquired Michael, his face falling.

"My dear boy, you must have something to do first. Four hundred a-year is very well for a bachelor, and might possibly do, with economy, for a young married couple; but there are other contingencies to be provided for, you must remember."

Michael blushed like a girl.

"Might we not think about those things later?"

"Certainly not. Besides, I have heard Mrs. Chester say again and again that she would not give her daughter to an idle man."

"I am sure I don't want to be idle, uncle—it isn't that; but I have a great horror of long engagements."

"You prefer to marry in haste and repent at leisure, I suppose?" returned Mr. Pierpoint.

"I am sure I never should repent."

"All lovers say that, and I am ready to admit that you have more reason than most, for Flora is a charming young woman, and has been well brought up; but because she is all this, you are the more bound to consider her interests before the gratification of your own wishes."

"But is it against her interests to marry me, uncle Bryan?"

"At present it is. She deserves a good home; and what have you to offer her?"

Michael's head drooped, and he looked painfully discouraged.

"I fancied my devotion would make up for a good many deficiencies in other ways."

"Perhaps it might, just now; but there is the future to think of, and you have no right to let her make any sacrifices, Michael. No, my lad," and he laid his hand kindly on the other's shoulder, "go to work bravely, and a year hence, when you have some prospect of getting on, come back and claim her. If she is all I take her to be, you will have gained a good deal of her respect, and lost nothing of her love in the meantime."

Michael looked very disappointed; but saw the wisdom of his uncle's suggestion, and admitted it up to a certain point.

"Only," he repeated wistfully, "I have the feeling I told you of just now—that Flora will never be my wife unless I marry her at once."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Mr. Pierpoint. "Why not?"

"I don't know, uncle. There are a good many things one can't explain, and yet feel to be true. I am not apt to have presentiments, and, therefore, this one frightens me."

"My dear fellow, I tell you what it is," said Mr. Pierpoint, indulgently; "you have never been in love before, and, therefore, don't understand your own sensations. Who desires

much, also fears much," according to our Latin primers; and you must take the bitters with the sweets, like other people. I dare say you have all sorts of presentiments—men have at such times; but I hope and expect to have the pleasure of dancing at your wedding next Christmas, for all that."

"Next Christmas!" repeated Michael, disconsolately. "What! wait a whole year?"

"Why not? You are only twenty-four; Flora barely eighteen. What is the use of a couple of children trying to keep house, and bringing up other children?"

"And you think twelve months will make all the difference, uncle?"

"Yes, I do. The thought of your coming responsibilities will make you look at things in a stronger light than you have hitherto done, and therefore the year's experience will help you more than all those that have gone before. Believe me, Michael, I have your best interests at heart; for you two lads are all I have left in the world. If it were better that you should marry at once, I would not withhold my consent; but I believe that it would be a serious mistake, for several reasons—I do, indeed."

"I can't see it, for the life of me," answered Michael, despondently.

"You will later, my dear boy. Listen to me, Michael," he added, after a pause. "You know, don't you, that I have some money invested in coffee plantations in Ceylon?"

"I remember hearing you say so."

"Well, my partner and manager—for he is both together—wants to come home, now that his family is growing up, and it suddenly struck me this afternoon that it would be a good thing for you and Donald to go out there in his place."

"What if we mismanaged the estate?"

"Jarvis would stay for a month or so, to show you how to get along, and you could have a manager under you. I fancy you would both like the life, and Donald could stay out there if he cared to do so."

"But how would that advance me, uncle?"

"In this way. I would make over the estate to you two, at the end of the year; and if Donald worked it, and you were the agent over here, you would make a very good thing of it, I am sure."

"But what about Jarvis's share?"

"I shall buy that, if you agree to my proposition. He has offered it to me at a fair and reasonable price, and there is nothing to do but to write to him that I have accepted his offer, and to tell him to expect you and Donald by the next ship."

"Must I go at once, then?" inquired Michael, who began to think that fate was against him.

"In a fortnight. I see that the Derwentwater is advertised to sail on the 10th of January, and you ought to be ready by then."

"But, uncle, we have no right to let you spend your money on us."

"My dear boy, everything I have in the world will belong to you and Donald one of these days, and therefore you may as well have a little now. But I want to hinder you from too soon taking such serious responsibilities."

"Uncle," said Michael, after a long silence, "will you tell me one thing?"

"What is it?"

"Your exact motive for sending me out of England?"

"You suspect I have another besides the one I mentioned, then?"

"Yes, I do; because, after all, with the same assistance that you will give me out there, I might do something in England, and marry Flora at once."

"Exactly; but that is what I wish to prevent, because I feel that you are both of you too young at present to venture on matrimony."

"Plenty of men marry at twenty-four, uncle?"

"Yes; but women of their own age, who know something of the world, and can keep them straight—not a mere child like Flora

Chester, who will need guiding at every step herself. Besides, I am not quite convinced that you are both of you sure of your own minds; and a year's absence will be exactly the test that is needed. If you care for each other as much at the end of that time as you do now, you will have a very happy future before you; if you discover that you have made a mistake, there will have been no harm done."

"Except depriving us of a whole year's felicity," said Michael, rather resentfully.

"For the sake of making you happier all the other years."

"I don't know about that. I am a great advocate for enjoying the present, and trusting to Providence so far as the future is concerned. You know we are told to take no thought for the morrow, uncle?"

"Yes; but not in this sense. But, tell me, have you spoken to Mrs. Chester, yet?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then, go to her at once, and if she consents to your immediate marriage, I will: but I fancy she will be on my side; and if so, you can tell her of my proposition, and hear if she approves. You may also tell her that I intend to settle three hundred a-year on Flora at once, so that, in case of my death before you are married, she may be provided for."

"Oh, uncle!" exclaimed Michael, ashamed of his former petulance; "how good you are!"

"Not half good enough," answered Mr. Pierpoint, sadly. "But, at my age, we begin to realize what a failure we have been, and to be anxious to give the young folks the benefit of our experience, to prevent them from going to pieces on the rocks where our own bark was shipwrecked. Mine has not been a happy life, Michael; but it is drawing to a close now!"

"Uncle, I can't allow you to speak like that! Remember you are only sixty years old, and may live a great many years yet!"

"I dare say; who can tell? But I should be sorry to think so, Michael. Life looks very bright to you; and that you may keep your illusions will be my earnest prayer. But I won't detain you any longer. Go and see Mrs. Chester, and come back to me when you have had her answer."

Michael rose eagerly, seizing his hat, and in another minute Mr. Pierpoint saw him go into the street, his hair sprucely brushed, and a flower in his buttonhole.

"Ah, those lovers!" he said to himself, with a strange, wistful smile, and went, sighing, back to his seat.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CRUEL WISDOM OF MIDDLE AGE.

FLORA was watching at the window, and as soon as Michael appeared in sight ran and hid herself in a cupboard, and stopped up her ears, although there was not the slightest need for these precautions.

Her heart went pit-a-pat against her bodice, like a imprisoned bird against the wire of its cage, and her cheeks were like a couple of red roses in their summer prime.

All the morning she had had hard work not to betray herself, so unaccustomed was she to anything like deception, and every affectionate word from her mother's lips smote her like a sword.

But all this was over now. At that very moment Michael was shut up with Mrs. Chester in her morning-room, and was getting through his nervous task as best he might.

She only hoped her mother would not fetch her down to ratify his words, for her courage had all vanished, even before Michael knocked at the door, and she could hardly have faced a fly at this important moment.

But everything went on quietly enough—outwardly.

The big clock in the hall struck eleven-quarter past—the half hour—a quarter to— and was giving the little click that preluded noon, when the door of Mrs. Chester's morning-room opened abruptly, and Michael went

through the hall like a whirlwind, opened the outer door, and disappeared.

Flora had ventured as far as the landing by this time, and caught sight of his flushed face as he passed underneath. But as soon as he was gone she darted into her own room, and watched him, with all her heart in her eyes, as he hurried along the trim garden paths out into the road.

"Mamma won't hear of our engagement," she had just said to herself, when she turned suddenly, and found Mrs. Chester at her elbow.

Mrs. Chester's eyes were troubled, and her face pale, but she was not angry, only sorrowful, as she put her arms round Flora's shoulders, and said in a moved voice, "Why are you in such a hurry to desert me, child? I had hoped to keep you for several years yet."

"But, mamma, you are not going to lose me."

"I can't disguise from myself that it will be very much the same thing, Flora, for all men suspect their mother-in-law, and I should not like to be an element of discord in your married home. A girl when she married must choose between her mother and her husband, and, of course, there can be no question as to which side she ought to take. I almost wish you had been a boy now, Flora."

"Oh, mamma!"

"Then I should have kept you longer to myself, anyhow. But it is no use grumbling," she added, dashing the tears out of her eyes; "you are only fulfilling your destiny, I suppose. I must make the most of the year that is left, for I have insisted upon that delay, not from any selfish motive, but because I believe it to be desirable on account of your extreme youth."

"I am sure Michael is in no hurry," said Flora, blushing divinely.

"And I am sure he is, my love; but it fortunately happens that Mr. Pierpoint takes exactly my view of the matter."

"You have seen Mr. Pierpoint, then?"

"No; but Michael admitted as much. However, he will tell you all this himself, for he is coming to take you for a walk at two o'clock."

"Mamma," said Flora, resolutely, although her lips whitened as she spoke, "if you wish it, I will give up Michael."

"And break your heart, eh, Flora?"

"That I can't say; but I have heard that hearts don't break very easily, and I ought to think of you before him."

Mrs. Chester turned her daughter's face round to the light, and gazed steadily into the uplifted eyes.

"Flora," she said, at last, "do you love Michael Pierpoint?"

"Yes, mamma," was the modest, but firm reply.

"With all your heart and strength?"

"With all my heart and strength," repeated Flora.

"Better than me, of course?"

"It is such a different love, I cannot compare the two. I know I love you very, very dearly, mamma—so much, that I would sacrifice the whole happiness of my life to spare you pain."

"And then pine away before my eyes, I suppose?"

"No, I don't think I am one of that sort. All the savor would have gone out of my life, perhaps; but if you were satisfied—"

"And you imagine that I should be satisfied, Flora?"

"No," she answered, promptly.

"Then don't talk nonsense, child. I am sure that if I demanded the sacrifice you speak of you would make it, but I have no mind that you should be a martyr. Be happy your own way; and I—well, I must do as well as I can."

Flora was crying unrestrainedly by this time, but through all her distress concerning her mother, was proud and glad of Michael's love.

Mrs. Chester cried with her a little; then put the girl away, and bidding her remember that she had Michael to please now, and that red eyes were not becoming, stole away and left her.

No one could have called Flora selfish, and yet it was odd how soon she forgot her mother's pain and disappointment in selecting her toilet for the afternoon's walk; while poor Mrs. Chester, fast locked in her chamber, wept the bitterest tears that she had shed since her husband's death.

When Michael spoke of his uncle's plans to her that afternoon, Flora was first of all indignant, for it seemed cruel to separate her from Michael in the early days of their love. But young as she was, she had a wonderful fund of good sense, and gradually came to see the advantages that would accrue to her lover from this appointment, and to look at the matter in the right light.

"Of course it will be miserable to have the sea between us, Michael," she murmured in her dulcet voice; "but a year will soon pass away, and then we need never to be separated again. I am only a foolish little girl now, but while you are gone I mean to try very hard to grow wiser in every way."

"Oh, my darling, as if I were not more than satisfied!"

"I know you are, Michael; but then you are a little blind just now, and when your eyes are opened later, I want you to find me, as nearly as possible, all you thought. It would be so dreadful for you to be disappointed with me!"

"I am not afraid of that," he answered, regarding her with infinite tenderness! "Oh, Flora, how my heart will yearn after you all those weary months! Why, has your mother forgotten her own youth, that she condemns us to such a cruel parting?"

"She does not mean to be unkind, Michael; but thinks we are both so young that we cannot trust our feelings. I know I shall never change; but they say men are fickle, and you will see so many girls who are prettier and nicer than I am."

Michael had chosen a retired road for their walk; and after making sure that no one was in sight, drew her, blushing, into his arms, and kissed her with all a lover's fire.

"You little coquette! you are fishing for compliments! You know quite well that if I searched the whole world through I should never find any one to equal you."

"That is because you fancy I am so much better than I really am."

"Nothing of the kind, miss. I have studied you, and ought to be able to judge you rightly by this time."

"You are prejudiced in my favor, Michael."

"Not at starting. I didn't fall headlong in love with your beautiful eyes, child, although I admired them vastly, I must own. But if you had been only beautiful you would never have won me, for the most perfect body in the world would never attract me if it were the harbor of a deformed soul. Do you know what first made me like you?"

"No," she said, shy and curious.

"The way you spoke to your mother, and also to the poor. But the thing that finished me off, and made me quite certain that I could not live without you, was—guess?"

Flora shook her head.

"I passed Stocker's cottage one day, and hearing your voice, could not resist the temptation of peeping in at the window. What I saw there made me your slave for life."

"What did you see there?"

"Well, a very pretty girl leaning over a sick boy, with a face full of sweet compassion. If I wanted to picture an angel, I should picture her like that. And, do you know, I had such a tender reverence for my darling after that, I hardly think I should have dared ask her to be my wife if she had not encouraged me by a little human coquetry."

"I am sure I never coquettled with you, Michael. I was too afraid."

"Too afraid of what?"

"Of my own feelings."

This admission gained her another rapturous embrace.

"My dear love—my sweet wife that is to be," he murmured, "how shall I ever be able to thank you enough for all your goodness—how properly evince my gratitude for the joy you have brought into my life?"

"Only be good to me, Michael; that is all I ask," she said, with a simplicity that very greatly touched him. "My whole life belongs to you now, and I can only be happy by and through you."

"Can't you trust me, Flora?"

"I think I can, Michael. I don't look very much afraid, do I? But we ought to go home now. We really must. Mamma will be frightened if we are late, and you know she promised we should be as much together as possible the next fortnight; so we mustn't impose upon her kindness. By the by, you have not yet told me what Donald said to our engagement?" observed Flora, presently.

"Very little. He is never a great talker, you know, but he likes you immensely, Flora. I remember his saying so about a week ago, so it is certain to be all right."

"Won't he be jealous of me with you?"

"Possibly, at first; but he is very generous-hearted, and will soon conquer such a feeling, and take you back into favor again. I wish he weren't going abroad with me, for then I should have some one to write to me, and tell me just how you were looking, and so on. I know very well you will talk as little about yourself as possible, and that will naturally be the subject to interest me the most."

"Then I will promise to be terribly egotistical, and fill my letters with big I's," answered Flora, laughing. "Indeed, I shall have nothing else to write about."

"I am very glad to hear it. Oh, dear!" he added, with a sigh; "what a pity it is that happy hours pass so quickly. We seem only to have come out half an hour ago, and now it is time to go back."

"But the pleasure can be repeated to-morrow, Michael."

"A pleasure never repeats itself, Flora; and who can count on the morrow?"

"I wish you wouldn't speak like that, Michael; you make me feel so insecure."

"Do I? Then I will try to change my manners. You know I only mean, after all, that I like to be happy in the present. Most people agree with me there."

"Of course," she said; "but it is so pleasant to look forward as well. The present would not be worth much if we were sure it would have no future."

On reaching home, they found Mr. Pierpoint seated very cosily at Mrs. Chester's fireside, drinking a cup of tea and eating toast, although he greatly disapproved, as a rule, of what he called "intermediate meals."

He welcomed Flora quite affectionately, patting her cheek, and asking her when she was going back to school. He enjoyed his own little jokes so much that Flora could not help laughing shyly, although she would have been thankful if he had left her alone.

However, he stayed a full hour—a very rare honor for him—and was considerate enough to leave Michael behind him when he went away, which showed, Flora thought, that he had not forgotten what it was to be young.

All her life long Flora could remember that evening, for it seemed to her the happiest of all those she and Michael passed together. Their happiness was so new, and excited them so much, that they forgot the parting that hung over them, and were as frankly and simply happy as two young children at play in the sunshine.

Mrs. Chester watched them for a while; then had her reading lamp brought, and retired behind the newspaper, from whence she came forth only at tea time. After tea she had a nap, so that altogether Michael and Flora were as good as alone, the slight restraint adding a

little charm of mystery to their whispered confidences.

But it came to an end only too soon. The clock striking eleven roused Mrs. Chester, who began to fold up her newspaper in a suggestive way Michael could not disregard.

But Flora followed him into the hall to get his hat for him, and he had the chance of one kiss before he went out into the frosty night—the happiest man in all England, except for the fact that he was about to leave it.

The next morning had to be given up entirely to business. Donald seemed well pleased at his uncle's proposition, and his moody manner lightened a little. Michael, who had been watching him anxiously ever since his strange conduct on Christmas Eve, was greatly relieved to see him show some interest in their mutual prospects.

Indeed, Donald was the more eager of the two, and developed an activity of mind and body that made Mr. Pierpoint prophesy he would die a rich man, after all. Nearly every day he ran up to town, and, thanks to his zeal and enterprise, Michael was able to pass nearly all his time with Flora.

Mrs. Chester worked hard meanwhile at all contrivances for their cabin, and Flora was netting them purses. Little presents came from other quarters too, for the twin brothers were general favorites, although the young men bore Michael a grudge for carrying off the belle of the neighborhood.

It had been settled, after some hesitation on Mrs. Chester's part, that she and Flora should accompany Michael and Donald to Liverpool, in order that the young lovers might see the very last of each other.

Mrs. Chester had thought at first that this would be too much for the girl, but when she pleaded to be allowed to go, and promised to control herself, Mrs. Chester gave in—against her own judgment be it said.

The last evening they all spent together in Mrs. Chester's house. Donald had at first declined the invitation, saying he had so much to attend to that he could not spare the time; but when Flora said, reproachfully, "It would be very unkind of you to disappoint us, when you think how long it must be before we are all together again," he answered, in a moved voice, "If you wish it, Flora, that is enough."

"Of course I wish it," she replied, tossing her pretty head with unconscious coquetry. "Mamma was only saying last night that our party always seemed incomplete without you."

"Naturally, you did not agree with her," observed Donald, with a kind of covert eagerness that would have startled Flora if she had been an older woman.

"Naturally, I did agree with her. What do you mean, sir?" and Flora pouted. "Have you ever had even to wait for a welcome from me?"

"No; because you have a kind heart, Flora. But somehow I always feel in the way here."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Donald; for you must think mamma and I very false people!"

"On my honor, Flora, I never meant that. I like Mrs. Chester immensely; and as for you—"

He broke off suddenly, and turned away; but being so innocent, Flora followed him, and put her arm caressingly through his.

"You look upon me quite as a sister, do you not? Do you know, Donald, I used to be quite jealous of you at first?"

"Jealous of me?"

"Why not, if Michael liked you best?"

"But was that probable, Flora?"

"I don't know. I was foolish enough to fancy so then, at any rate."

"And now?"

"Oh, now I am sure Michael loves me best of all the world, and you next. You won't grudge me my place, Donald, for I ought to come first, oughtn't I?"

"Yes," he answered, readily; "I would not have it otherwise."

"Oh, thank you, Donald; you have made me

so happy by what you have just said, for I have always been a little afraid that you were hurt with me for what had happened, and yet we could not help loving each other, you know."

"Is that your theory, Flora?"

"Yes; but of course, if we had known it to be wrong, we should have fought against the very beginning."

"And supposing you had not conquered, what then?" inquired Michael, with a faint shudder.

"Then we should know we hadn't tried enough, and have to begin all over again," replied Flora, simply.

To her utter surprise, Donald, who had hitherto been so undemonstrative that she had fancied he disliked her, turned round suddenly, and said, "Will you give me a sister's kiss, Flora? I don't think Michael would mind."

"On the contrary, I am sure he would be very pleased; for he wants us to love each other like brother and sister," she replied, and put up her mouth with the innocence of a child.

Donald kissed her once, tenderly, reverentially, and then staggered toward the door, and disappeared.

"Poor Donald! how sensitive he is!" said Flora, to herself. "I wish he didn't take Michael's engagement so much to heart; but I suppose it was to be expected, and he will become reconciled in time. I must tell Michael to be as considerate as possible."

Which she did, but somehow she forgot to say anything about the kiss.

That last evening was not a very cheerful one, although Mr. Pierpoint talked jestingly of a year's separation as if it were a mere nothing, and rallied Michael unmercifully when he hid his face while Flora was singing his favorite song.

Directly the brothers entered the room, Mrs. Chester had been surprised at the alteration in Donald. Hitherto, both Michael and himself had worn whiskers as well as a mustache, but now Donald wore a mustache only; and when Mrs. Chester looked surprised, he explained that Mr. Pierpoint had thought it desirable to make some distinction of this kind between them, as otherwise it would be almost impossible for strangers to distinguish one from the other.

"But wasn't that a sudden idea?" Mrs. Chester asked.

"Yes; it was the result of an accident that happened last night. Uncle took me for Michael, and did not discover his mistake for full ten minutes. He said, then, that this sort of thing would complicate all our business arrangements, and we ought to make it impossible. As an engaged man, Michael was naturally unwilling to sacrifice his whiskers, and therefore I laid mine on the altar of fraternal affection."

"Well, I like you quite as well without them, Donald, and you won't miss the warmth of them out there."

"And I have no one to take any interest in my appearance," said Donald, laughing rather bitterly. "The nuisance will be having to shave every morning."

"Yes, but when you feel cooler all day in consequence, you will find it a set-off," answered Mrs. Chester, consolingly; and then nothing more was said on the subject of Donald's whiskers.

Indeed, Flora never noticed the difference until Michael called her attention to it; and then she had things of more interest to absorb her, and simply glanced his way, and observed carelessly. "So he has," evidently forgetting all about it the next moment.

When every one was talking, the young lovers stole out, and stood under the stars together, just where they had stood on the night of their betrothal.

The landscape looked much the same as then, only that the moon was on the wane now, and there were no Christmas bells to give them greeting.

There they renewed their vows solemnly, hand in hand, heart to heart; and Flora insisted upon being allowed to swear that if anything should happen to prevent her marrying Michael, she would never allow any man to take his vacant place.

"I don't like you to make a promise of that sort, dear," Michael said; "for you are very young, and might suffer cruelly one of these days for your vow's sake. I know you will be faithful to me while I live, and that is all I ought to ask."

"But you know, Michael, you would rather not picture it possible for me to care for any one else?"

"Well, yes; but then I should be beyond picturing anything, darling. Besides, I love you so dearly, Flora, that I desire your happiness before my own."

"And I desire yours before my own, Michael, believe me."

"I am sure you do, Flora. Even this little while that we have been engaged, our lives have become so mingled, that I always feel now as if there were two of us to enjoy and two to suffer. Has that ever struck you?"

"Oh, yes; my life is much fuller and sweeter nowadays, and altogether different. I felt almost a child before, and suddenly have grown to womanhood, with a woman's responsibilities—for being engaged is so very like being married, isn't it?"

"I don't think it is nearly so nice, love; for if we were married there would be no need for us to part."

"True; but we said we wouldn't grieve over the parting, Michael, only try to look forward with hope to our next happy Christmas. After all, the time will pass very quickly, as uncle Bryan says, and—and—"

And here Flora, who was so much wiser in speech than in fact, burst out crying, and all the rest of their time was passed by Michael in consoling the poor child, who had, at first, preached to him of courage and resignation.

It may be doubted if either Michael or Flora slept that night; but if another kept vigil with them, no one guessed it. All the sympathy of the two households, and even of the entire neighborhood, was with the young lovers, and they did not so much as divine the sufferings that were so proudly concealed and so bravely borne.

Mrs. Chester had a somewhat restless night herself, for she heard Flora moving about in her room whenever she roused, and understood that the poor child was making very poor preparation for a trying day.

However, it was no use remonstrating, and when she went to call her at six o'clock, and Flora came out in her traveling-dress, she made no remark, but appeared to think it a matter of course that she should be ready, although they did not start until nine.

The Derwentwater was to sail at noon the next day, and as Liverpool was an eight hours' journey from Ayshe, they were obliged to sleep at the former place, unless they traveled all night, which Mrs. Chester strongly opposed.

Flora shared her mother's bed in the hotel, and was so thoroughly worn out by this time that she slept in spite of herself, and was thereby strengthened for that which she had still to go through.

They were a very silent party at breakfast, and as soon as the meal was over went off to the ship; and Flora had the sorrowful satisfaction of putting the last touches to Michael's cabin, hanging up a charming photograph of herself beside his berth, which she made Donald promise to uncover as soon as Michael could no longer see her from the shore.

"Oh, my dear love, this is very hard to bear!" Michael said, as he held her in his arms for the last time, with a passionate strain.

"You will be true to me, darling?"

"So help me Heaven, I will never have any husband but you."

"Bless you, my sweet one—my dearest, my precious girl!" he cried out, almost beside himself; and then Mr. Pierpoint and Mrs. Chester

took Flora away from him; and Donald, who was as white as death himself, caught hold of his arm and led him away.

"Let me see the very last of her!" Michael pleaded. "Who knows whether I may ever set eyes on her dear face again?"

But Donald was inexorable, and held his brother fast until the good ship Derwentwater had sailed out of the docks, and was lost to sight in the cold and dim mist.

CHAPTER V.

TOO TIRED TO WAIT.

FOR the first month after Michael's departure Flora took no interest in any thing, and wandered about the house in a listless sort of way, neglecting even her poor, and seeming to be selfishly preoccupied in her troubles.

Mrs. Chester let her alone, believing that her own common sense would be her best guide, after all; and she was right. Gradually Flora resumed her usual avocations, and if something of the savor had gone out of them, the girl never complained.

Meanwhile there came a long letter from Michael, from on board the Derwentwater, and Flora brightened a little. She used to sleep with the precious letter under her pillow, and her first act on waking was to press it again and again to her lips.

Mrs. Chester had to wait twenty-four hours for any information, and then it oozed out very slowly.

"Yes, Michael was quite well."

"And was he enjoying his voyage?"

"Oh, mamma, as if he could, under the circumstances!" exclaimed Flora, reproachfully.

"I meant as well as could be expected, love; of course we know that he cannot be in wild spirits."

"He is not in any spirits at all," sighed Flora. "Every day he feels the parting more, he says, and longs more for our reunion."

"That is quite natural; but making love is not all a man's life, my dear, and I think you would despise Michael if he were satisfied to remain tied to your apron-string."

"Indeed I should; but I wish he could have had some work nearer home."

"Patience, Flora, and even that will come. Do you know you are fortunate, having so much to look forward to, for so many of us just live because we must, and have nothing to hope for in this world."

"Then I don't understand how it is they have the courage to live at all."

"My dear child, there are so many possibilities in life which your limited experience would not, naturally, embrace. People live on, somehow, when they appear to have nothing to live for!"

"I dare say they do; but I don't think I should have the courage."

"What do you mean, child?" inquired her mother, sharply.

"I didn't mean that I should commit suicide, of course, mamma; but I fancy death would come as easily, if more slowly."

Mrs. Chester could not help saying, "And yet you would still have me if Michael died?"

"I was not thinking only of Michael's death, mamma, but of any great trouble. You know that if he were to return to-morrow, and your place was vacant, he would not get much of a welcome."

Mrs. Chester kissed her, but sighed too. She knew she could count on Flora's affection, but knew also that she had no longer the first place in her daughter's heart; and though she had so often told herself this must needs come, had always put off the evil day indefinitely in her own mind.

And lo! it had come upon her suddenly, and her heart was very sore.

Flora had declined all invitations the first few weeks, and was inclined to persevere in this rigid seclusion; but Mr. Pierpoint, who was learning to look upon her quite as a daughter, sent for her one day, and represented mat-

ters to her in such a light that Flora, who was really sensible, began to see that she pained and annoyed her mother, and depressed her own spirits, without in any way hastening Michael's return; and after that went out whenever there was a party in the neighborhood, and was almost shocked to find that she had not lost all her relish for these distractions.

Still her greatest comfort and pleasure were Michael's frequent letters. Naturally somewhat reserved in speech, he seemed to be able to write better than he talked, and she learned to trust him thoroughly as the months went on, and to appreciate him even more than she had done before.

And so the winter passed, and spring and summer came in their turn, yearning to give place to the ruddy autumn, with its lingering flowers and tempting fruits. With the fall of the leaf came a great change in Mr. Pierpoint. He had been ailing all through the summer, but those about him felt no alarm, as the bad weather always tried him a good deal.

He was sure to be all right when it became cooler, he would say when Mrs. Chester questioned him anxiously about his health; and then would beg Flora not to make Michael anxious, as there was no occasion to do so.

"And remember, ma'am," he would add laughingly to Mrs. Chester, "you are engaged to me for the first dance at Flora's wedding-party. I don't mind telling you, quite between ourselves, that Michael is my favorite of the two lads—there is something so honest and true about him."

Another month passed away, and although Mrs. Chester scarcely dared acknowledge her own fears, much less speak of them to Flora, she began to see that Mr. Pierpoint was sinking so fast that there could be but little hope of his ever seeing Michael again.

He seemed to doubt this himself at times, for he was always giving them messages for "the lads," and occasionally, when at his best, would call for his desk, and write eagerly for a few minutes.

But this seemed to agitate him so much that Flora would try by every tender device to coax the pen out of his hand.

"You know, uncle," she would say, in her sweet, persuasive tones, "you have told me everything, and I am not likely to forget. You must economize your strength as much as possible. There is no reason why you should not see Michael yourself, and say all you are writing there, if you will only be careful."

"My dear child, all the care in the world would not keep me alive for ten days now."

"But we calculated that with favorable winds Michael might be here in eight, uncle," said Flora, who could no longer deceive herself respecting his near danger.

"But what are our human calculations, child? Can we still this cruel hurricane, which has been raging round our coast for the last two days?"

"No; but it is not obliged to be general," she answered, shuddering, for it almost seemed as if the old man's fears were prophetic; or, rather, that standing on the edge of the unknown land, he must see and know things that were beyond her view.

"It always is general. After a spell of this weather one hears of so many disasters at sea, not only near home, but also at a distance, that we tremble for those we love. I have no penetration beyond yours," he added, as if he read her thoughts; "but I am drawing now on the experience of sixty years, my dear."

"Oh, then, please don't, uncle Christopher," she said, imploringly. "I have had such strange, dreadful presentiments myself lately, that I—I—"

Here she broke down a little, and turned away to hide her tears. But remembering that Mr. Pierpoint must not be excited, she came back to his side again in another minute, with a smile on her lips, although tears lingered in her eyes.

"You see how foolish I am. I can't bear the

least allusion of this sort. I do feel as if my life would be so utterly lost and hopeless without Michael."

"Nay, Flora; you have a brave spirit, and whatever comes will be able to bear it," said Mr. Pierpoint, with an impressiveness that Flora remembered in later days. "You are not one of those weak reeds which break in every storm, but rather, it seems to me, you would brace yourself to bear it."

"I hope I should; but why should all this be, uncle?"

"My dear child, I never said it would be; and I pray with all my heart that you may have as much happiness as you deserve. But there are possibilities of this sort in every life, however bright it may seem outwardly, and surely it behoves us to be prepared."

"But we should never have a happy moment, uncle Christopher, if we were always anticipating evil."

"To strengthen oneself so that it would be possible to bear them courageously if they came is not to anticipate them, Flora."

"Ah, well!" she said, sighing, "it sounds so much like the same thing; and somehow I am feeling very faint-hearted already. It may be this terrible wind moaning at one's window all night, like a human creature in pain, depresses me; or that I can't get Mrs. Jacob's story out of my head."

"What was Mrs. Jacob's story?" inquired Mr. Pierpoint.

"It was about her son. She told me she lost him in just such a gale as this, when his ship was within a mile of the shore. It was to have been his last voyage in any case, poor fellow, and he was to have married his cousin Mary a month after his return. I quite won her heart by crying with her, but I am afraid I was thinking more of Michael than of her son, too. Oh, uncle, if he were to be drowned!"

"Then we should know it was for the best, my dear, hard as it might seem. But let us hope that you will have a happy meeting, and a long life with our dear Michael."

"Amen!" she answered softly, and bent down and kissed his hand, for her heart was very full. "But our happiness will not be complete without you, uncle Christopher."

"Then Michael must come soon," he said, "for my time is very short."

All the next week Mr. Pierpoint was so feeble and exhausted that they fancied each day must needs be his last.

As he could not bear Flora out of his sight, Mrs. Chester remained in the house with her daughter, and perhaps prayed for Michael's return almost as heartily as Flora did, for she felt that there ought to be some one belonging to him in the house at such a time, and Mr. Pierpoint declared himself to have no relations but his nephews.

Flora scarcely left him, except to take the repose that was actually necessary; and then Mrs. Chester had to insist on this, for the girl could not bear to leave the dying man's bedside, for when he saw her move, he would say, ever so wistfully, "Come back soon, my dear, but I don't want to tire you, of course."

All the while she was gone he would keep asking, in his restless, eager way, when she was coming back again: though when Mrs. Chester reminded him that she really required rest, he would evidently try hard to restrain his impatience.

But it was wonderful to see how his dim eyes brightened when she returned to her seat by his side, and how readily he took from her hand the broth or wine he had refused before.

The chief thing that troubled Flora was that sometimes, when his mind wandered, he would call her Michael's widow, and say to her, solemnly, "Ah! poor Michael, he loved you dearly! Be true to his memory, child."

"I promise you that," she would answer, humoring his sad fancy. "You know, uncle, I never could put any one in his place."

"There is no one worthy, my dear; and if Michael had lived, he would have loved you faithfully to the very end, so that he deserves

equal constancy. What a brave, bonny lad he was! As his mother said to me yesterday—"

Poor Flora shivered convulsively. Michael's mother had been dead for years.

"I mean last week," he added, correcting himself. "'I don't fancy Michael will make a great name in the world, because he has such a tender heart he will be always making way for others. But then what a happy home he will have, and what a lucky woman his wife will be!' And you know how right she was, don't you, my dear?"

"Yes oh, yes!" she answered, in a stifled voice. "Michael is so good!"

He laid his hand suddenly on her arm, making her start violently.

"Don't say *is*, Flora; say *was*. You must try and get accustomed to the truth. Michael is lost to you forever!"

He almost shouted the last sentence; and Flora, whose nerves were all quivering, started up, and uttered a faint cry.

"Oh, uncle Christopher, don't say that!"

"I must tell you the truth, since the others will not." And he sat upright with sudden strength, his hollow, shining eyes seeming to pierce her through and through. "Michael kissed you for the last time on board the Derwentwater, the day he sailed for Ceylon."

This was only the wild fancy of a dying man, and Flora knew it, and yet his words were very swords. She hid her face in the bed-clothes, and tried not to hear his ravings; and presently he fell into a sort of stupor, which lasted for several hours.

Mrs. Chester made the girl come away then; but though she lay down at her mother's bidding, her nerves had been so unstrung by all she had gone through that day that she kept starting up and screaming, and would not be comforted until Mrs. Chester lay down beside her, and folded her closely in her arms.

"I shall never see Michael again!" she sobbed out. "Never, never! He says so."

"Hush, my darling! Who says so?"

"Uncle Christopher."

"But, my dear Flora, I thought you had too much sense to listen to a dying man's delirium. What does he know? His mind is full of Michael, naturally; and because his nephew is not at his bedside pictures all sorts of misfortunes. Can't you see the connection in his wandering mind that accounts for these ravings? I can, perfectly."

Flora shook her head despairingly.

"No, mamma, for I have had such strange feelings and presentiments myself lately, that all his ravings seem true."

"Why didn't you tell all this, Flora, and I might have helped you?"

"I often wanted to, but could not find the courage. If I had spoken of them they would have felt true."

"On the contrary, my love, brooding over them has made them that. I could have disposed of all your arguments at one sitting, if you had given me the chance."

"I don't think you could, mamma. You know I love you very dearly, but if you were to talk to me forever, you would not talk down my fears. I am sure some great misfortune is impending."

"Of course there is, you foolish child! Poor Mr. Pierpoint cannot possibly be alive this time next week—I might almost say this time tomorrow. Isn't that misfortune enough?"

"Yes; but it isn't that."

"Really, Flora, I shall have to scold you if you are so absurd. Can't you see, child, that Mr. Pierpoint is delirious, and does not know what he says himself?"

"Exactly. That is why he speaks the truth."

"Come, Flora; people don't speak the truth by accident, or when they are mad."

"No; but children and fools do, they say; and uncle Christopher is a child and a fool together now, and is, therefore, wonderfully wise."

"That may be, but he is not a prophet."

"Who can tell?" she answered, dreamily:—

"Old experience doth attain
To something like prophetic strain."

"But you don't call that 'old experience,' Flora?"

"I don't know what to call it, mamma, but it is very strange. Just what I have been fearing these last weeks he has put into words."

"Not the least knowing what he was saying."

"We can't be sure of that. I fancy dying people understand things better than we do."

"Flora, I shall really be angry with you if you talk so much nonsense," said Mrs. Chester, severely, for she saw that Flora was so hysterical she needed scolding. "Try and go to sleep. Nothing will quiet your nerves like rest."

Flora closed her eyes dutifully, and was silent for full ten minutes. Then she started up again, and began to pace the room distractedly until Mrs. Chester, seeing that she could not rest, carried her off for a walk in the lanes.

She came back with a beautiful flush on her tired face, but her eyes were still troubled, and Mrs. Chester felt sorry that she had to return to Mr. Pierpoint's bedside. But he was conscious now, and asking for her, so that it could hardly be helped.

The next three days were days of terrible anxiety, and the mournful watching, which makes the watchers feel as if they also were on the borders of the valley of the shadow.

Indeed, everything grew so unreal to Flora, that she ceased to notice the weather, or to remember that Michael might come now at any hour.

"Now, Miss Flora, my dear," said the old nurse, "you go to bed to-night. You can't do any good here, for Mr. Pierpoint won't get through the night, and isn't likely to know any of us again. You will make yourself ill without helping him. Besides, such scenes as this are not for young things like you."

"Why? The young die as well as the old, and one can't be too well prepared."

"Of course not; but there's time enough for all that, Miss Flora, as far as you are concerned. Why, you were only nineteen a few months ago."

"And Willie Beresford was only ten, and yet he died."

"That may be; but you mustn't talk in that way, Miss Flora. I hope you have plenty of happy years before you yet."

"I hope so, too," Flora replied, although her heart misgave her as she spoke; and then she went back sorrowfully to her post.

The last sands had nearly run out now, and the old man lay propped up with pillows, breathing heavily.

His eyes were closed, and they had thought him unconscious, but he looked up on hearing Flora's step, and laid his damp hand caressingly on hers, although he was too weak to speak.

The wind roared in the chimney, the rain splashed against the windows. Everything was inexpressibly dreary as the hours wore slowly on, striking with mournful impressiveness down below in the gloom of the silent hall.

Mrs. Chester did not leave the room, tired as she felt, for she believed that Flora needed her.

The old nurse, who was hardened to such scenes, dozed in her arm-chair by the fire. Flora sat upright and brave, but very pale, conscious of a great fear and horror over above any thing she had reason to expect.

The clock struck two—the darkest, dreariest and coldest hour of all the twenty-four—and then Mr. Pierpoint suddenly opened his eyes, and looked at Flora with a very wistful expression.

"Tell Michael," he said, in a loud voice, "that I waited for him as long as I could; but it is of no consequence now. We shall meet again soon; and Heaven bless you, dear!"

And as he spoke, he fell back on the pillow, dead.

At this moment a carriage drove up to the door, and a great gust of wind came raging through the hall, even to the sick-chamber; but Flora had fainted in her mother's arms, and the rest were too occupied to heed.

CHAPTER VI.

THE "CRUEL SOU'-WESTER."

MICHAEL would have enjoyed his life in Ceylon amazingly, only for the separation from Flora. But he felt that if he was not working with her he was working for her, and this knowledge gave him so much energy that in a very short time he had mastered all the difficulties of his new undertaking, and was able to dismiss the steward and take the entire management of the estate on himself.

Melancholy and preoccupied, Donald was not of much use; but Michael kept hoping that he would come to take more interest in things when he was thrown upon his own resources, and tried to associate him with all his plans; although the other would say quite bitterly at times: "It is all very well for you, Michael. You are going home at the end of the year to a charming young bride, while I am to be a lonely exile for years."

"Why for years, old fellow? Besides, in any case, you will come and pay us visits, you know."

"In fact, just take a peep at your Paradise, in order to make my own lot the more desolate by contrast," replied Donald, gloomily. "Surely you would not recommend that?"

"Shall I tell you what I would recommend?" said Michael, in his cheery way.

"Well, what?"

"A nice wife, old boy."

"Me a wife!" exclaimed Donald, with a sort of horror. "Never!"

"What is the impediment?"

And Michael turned and scrutinized his brother with earnest attention.

"My own feelings. I have no taste for matrimony."

"And yet you complain of your lot being desolate in comparison with mine."

"Because it is. What the deuce am I to do with myself over here when you are gone?"

"Why, work, of course."

"For whom?"

"For yourself; and because your success is dear to others. Flo and I will always feel as if something were wanting to our happiness all the while you are absent."

Donald laughed bitterly.

"No fear of that. You will have something better to think of."

"I wish you wouldn't take that tone, Donald," said Michael, reproachfully. "My marriage will make no difference in my feelings toward you. I am sure Flora would like me less if I were unfaithful to our old affection; because, after all, it is a certain guarantee that I shall be constant to her."

"I don't expect she has any anxiety on that ground."

"I hope not. She has no need, assuredly. If all the kingdoms in the world were offered to me to resign my darling, I should not be in the least tempted."

"I should think not, indeed. Who would not prefer happiness to power?"

"Some people think power is happiness."

"Poor, misguided creatures!" said Donald, quickly. "Give me love."

As the time for Michael's departure drew near, he became exceedingly anxious about Donald.

The young man seemed so terribly depressed that, remembering the attempt he had made on his life the last Christmas Eve, Michael dared hardly trust him out of his sight.

What might happen when Donald was left to his own devices, Michael trembled to think of; for it seemed to him that his brother had such an evil counselor in his heart.

Michael made every arrangement that could save Donald trouble before he left—engaging an excellent manager, so that, when his bro-

ther liked, he might get away to Columbo for a little gayety.

When Michael was dressed the morning of his departure, he went into Donald's room to bid him good-by, but found that his brother was gone.

Distressed and alarmed by such extraordinary conduct, he questioned the servants, and found that Donald had ridden away from home as soon as it was light, with a portmanteau strapped in front of him; and after some anxious reflection, Michael came to the conclusion that the other had done this in order to avoid a decided leave-taking, and that it was, perhaps, as well.

Still, his mind was not at ease; and, in spite of his bright prospects, he found himself often sighing as he rode along at the terrible change this last year had wrought in Donald.

After a while, as was but natural, Michael began to dwell more upon his meeting with Flora than his parting with his brother, and by the time he stepped on board the Simoom had made up his mind that it was his duty to have more faith, and that if he trusted to Providence all would come right in the end.

The Simoom had scarcely left the harbor before it encountered bad weather, and Michael saw only a few of his fellow-passengers for the first four days, for even those who were tolerably good sailors had not bargained for such a bad beginning.

The women and children were particularly ill, and Michael was so tender and helpful among them, Flora would have loved him more than ever, if possible, if she could only have been near. You never saw him on deck without some little one in his arms, and assuredly its own mother could not have been gentler or more patient, or soothed its fractious complainings with more tact.

But on the fourth day the storm abated; and, thankful to get a breath of air after their confinement below, the passengers began to crowd upon the deck, and bask in the pale, wintry sunshine.

Michael found himself quite a hero, and was truly embarrassed by all the thanks he received, for he loved little children so dearly that he was amply rewarded for any trouble he might have taken by their caresses and smiles.

There was a tolerably large party at dinner that evening, and the captain, who, of course, presided, looked more cheerful than he had done yet.

"We made a very bad beginning," he said; "but if the weather continues in the quarter it is now we shall soon make up for lost time. I don't like being behind if I can help it; but the winds and tides conquer me sometimes."

"But you have never been wrecked, Captain Marsh, have you?" said a pale, timid little woman on his right. "That is why I came with you. I am sure you must be skillful and lucky, both."

"I don't know about that, ma'am. Anyhow, I am not sorry that this is my last voyage, for now my lads are growing up I am wanted to guide the home ship."

"Then I don't know what my husband will do, for I shall never have the courage to go back with anybody but you," said the timid lady, plaintively. "I could have declared we were being drowned every hour of these last few nights."

"I fancy you would have felt very differently if you really had been," answered the old captain, dryly. "There's no mistaking that sort of thing."

"Oh, please don't talk about it! I sha'n't sleep a wink all night if you do," she sighed, in a tone of such real distress, that Michael, whose heart was so tender he could even sympathize with imaginary fears, was bending down to something kind and reassuring, when he suddenly started, and with difficulty suppressed a cry, for there, opposite, helping himself to soup with great composure, sat Donald.

Donald caught his eye, and nodded cheerfully, as much as to say, "Yes, here I am, old

fellow. Ar'n't you glad to see me?" and then went on with his dinner; while Michael felt so overcome he was obliged to excuse himself long before the meal was finished and get upon deck.

In about half an hour Donald came up, and touched him on the shoulder.

"Surprised to see me, weren't you, old boy?" he said, with his jauntiest air. "The fact was, I didn't want any fuss or explanations—what is the use of them when one's mind is made up?—and so I started a couple of hours before you the other morning and got on board before you arrived. I meant to keep my cabin for a day only, but was so confoundedly sea-sick I couldn't move until this afternoon; and then, as you were surrounded with women and children, thought I wouldn't disturb you."

"But what does all this mean?" inquired Michael, coldly.

"Well, it means that I did not choose to stay behind in this wretched country after you were gone. Mossop is perfectly honest and trustworthy, and understands his business. What earthly good should I have been out there under the circumstances?"

"I don't know; and of course I have no right to dictate to you, Donald, but I trust uncle Christopher will not be hurt."

"If he is, I shall tell him just this. If I had stayed out there alone I should have committed suicide. And now don't let us discuss the question any longer. You could not put yourself in my place if you tried; and whatever uncle Christopher has to say I shall listen to respectfully, if that is any comfort to you."

"It isn't that, Donald," replied Michael, with a passionate burst of confidence; "but I am anxious about you altogether. You are so wofully changed this last year."

Donald's lips quivered convulsively, and it almost seemed as if he would have said something. But whatever his intention might have been, he changed it suddenly, and walked to the other end of the deck.

In about five minutes he came back, with a cigar between his lips, and seemed so gloomy and taciturn, that Michael saw it would not be wise to resume their former conversation, and waited for a more favorable opportunity.

But it appeared as if Donald were determined to evade any explanation; for he took care his brother should never find him alone, and devoted himself so assiduously to a family on board, that very often Michael did not so much as exchange three words with him the whole day.

The voyage was now drawing to an end, and every one was thankful, for the weather had been terrible at times, and Captain Marsh's fine, weather-beaten old face had often looked troubled enough.

Once, even, when he was alone with Michael—to whom he had taken a great fancy—he said, with a sigh, "I wish it were well over, Mr. Pierpoint. I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but I have been as full of fancies as a fine lady this voyage."

"What kind of fancies?"

"Oh, I don't know," he answered, evasively. "Not pleasant ones, assuredly. But, then, in all my experience, I have never had such continuously bad weather before, and that is apt to depress a man. My last voyage ought to have been my best, but it has come very short of that."

"Has the ship ever been in actual peril then, captain?"

"On two occasions we shipped such terrible seas I did not expect the old craft could right herself again; and one ages years sometimes in such anxious moments as those," concluded Captain Marsh, passing his hand through his white hair. "Especially when one has so many helpless women and children on board."

"What would you do, supposing you knew there was no hope?" inquired Michael. "You would tell us, would you not?"

"Yes; it would be my duty. I could not let you go down like dogs without even a prayer, could I?"

"No," said Michael. "I am glad I know

this, for there is a storm brewing, is there not?"

Captain Marsh shook his head significantly.

"I have been waiting for sunset, hoping it might clear a little then; but the clouds look angrier than ever, and there is a sound in the wind I don't like at all. I sha'n't go to bed, of course, and shall keep a most anxious look-out; but—I may speak frankly to you—I shall be very much surprised if we are alive by morning."

Michael turned pale, for though a brave man, and a true Christain, life was very sweet to him, and he could not hear such a verdict as this without shuddering.

"Heaven have mercy on us!" he said, in a firm voice. "If you give up hope, I am sure there is nothing to be done."

"I have not given up hope yet, and sha'n't so long as there is anything left of the old Simoom; but we are in for such a storm as would make the strongest ship quail, and the Simoom has been a good deal punished of late."

"Do you mean she is no longer seaworthy?"

"Not exactly. I should have got her home all safe if the weather had cleared a bit."

"But couldn't you have put into some port for repairs, if you will excuse me for asking the question?"

"I have never had a chance of that since it became desirable, unfortunately. I have been trying all day to get into shelter, but the wind has been against us. I must go now," he added quickly, with a break in his clear, firm voice. "Whatever happens, Mr. Pierpoint, we must meet it like brave men."

"Ay!" answered Michael, gravely; and with a cordial shake of the hand, the two men parted.

Michael went in search of his brother then, and finding Donald in the saloon with his new friends, beckoned him on one side, and said, in a low, earnest tone, "Let us be together tonight, lad, for it may be our last in this world!"

Donald looked him calmly, almost triumphantly, in the eyes.

"We must all die one day," he said, "and as well now as later. Are all those people to be sent to bed unconscious of their danger?"

"No; look there!" answered Michael, and pointed to Captain Marsh, who had come among them, and raised his voice above the din of the storm to say, with deep feeling and solemnity, "My dear friends, nothing but a miracle could save us now. Since we must die, let us die bravely, praying for ourselves, and for those we love."

He shook a tear off his shaggy eyelashes, the only sign of weakness he displayed, and went back to his post, as a brave sailor should.

CHAPTER VII.

OUT OF THE DEEP.

MICHAEL looked at his brother as Captain Marsh's words reached them, and it seemed as if the near approach of death had moved both simultaneously, and brought back in a flash of thought the memory of all their old love and union, for they embraced each other as if they had been boys again; and indeed for the moment they felt like boys.

"Do you remember the day I was going to have a thrashing, Donald," said Michael, softly, "and you went to Dr. Downe, and asked him to let you take my place?"

"Ay," answered Donald, in a stifled voice; "nothing ever came between you and me until—until—"

"Go on," urged Michael. "I have known there was something."

"And you never guessed?"

"No; or I should have told you."

"I thought you would have seen that I loved Flora Chester, even as you loved her, Michael. Heaven knows I struggled against the feeling with all my might, for how could I help seeing from the very first that she liked you best. But it had seized hold of me with a grip of iron, and I could not tear it out of my heart. Pity me, Michael, for I have suffered so terribly, that just now, when you told me of

our danger, my first feeling was relief that the struggle would so soon be over."

"Poor fellow!" answered Michael, with infinite compassion. "Why didn't you tell me all?"

"Because you would have been for sacrificing yourself, or doing something wildly Quixotic. Moreover, it was you that Flora loved, not me, and it would have been cruel to shadow her Paradise even by a regret."

"Poor child! there will be a far more cruel shadow in her Paradise now," answered Michael, with the tenderest compassion. "But I am afraid we must try not to think of her just now, Donald. You and I are about the calmest here. Can't we be of some use to all those weeping women, for—for Flora's sake?"

Donald smiled softly.

"That is a good thought of yours, Michael; but as we cannot tell what may happen, let us bid each other good-by before we separate. Heaven bless you, old fellow! And if by any chance you should be saved and I should perish, take this comfort to your heart, that I was glad to be spared the torture of witnessing your happiness with Flora, although I loved you too dearly ever to doubt that she had chosen wisely and well."

"Ah, now I have my own generous brother back again!" answered Michael, deeply moved. "I am so thankful that there is nothing between us now—"

"But the old love and trust," put in Donald, affectionately, as he held out both his hands; and grasping them close for a moment, Michael tore himself away.

The unhappy passengers of the Simoom had been stunned at first by Captain Marsh's announcement, for which they were entirely unprepared. Having weathered two storms, they had begun to think there was nothing more to fear. Moreover, they had been lulled into false security by Captain Marsh's calmness earlier in the evening, and some of the women were just going to bed when he came into their midst with his terrible warning.

They knew that the brave old sailor was wont to put a good face on matters as long as he saw a gleam of hope, and, therefore, his solemn words had sounded like a death-knell. But then death seems so impossible when you are in your full health and strength, and some of them preferred to believe that a miracle would be performed in their behalf.

But in their secret hearts they knew better, and so huddled together in terrified groups, some weeping and bemoaning themselves passionately, some swooning, while a few gathered their children close about them, and waited for the supreme moment.

Michael passed by these groups—he was not wanted there—and bent down to speak some reassuring words to a poor young mother, who sat in silent despair, rocking her sleeping child on her breast.

"Thank you for trying to comfort me," she said, gratefully. "It isn't that I am afraid, really; only I am so sorry for Willie, for baby and I are all he has in the world. I wish I hadn't let him persuade me to come away now."

"But, you know, it would have been worse for him if you had died out there, and he could have felt that it was his fault for not having sent you home."

"I never thought of that," she answered, her pale face brightening. "If you should be saved by any chance, Mr. Pierpoint, will you write to my husband and tell him that I was quite brave at the last, and only troubled about him? Give him my dear, dear love, too, won't you? We were so happy together those two years!"

Her eyes were full of tears, but she still spoke courageously; and when Michael would have lingered by her side, she pointed to a poor, fainting woman, who had no friends on board, and said, gently: "She needs you most. I have baby."

A huge wave rolled over the ship at this moment, sweeping the decks, and rushing down the gangway, while the poor Simoom went

tottering into the black gulf ahead, with the angry wind hissing as if it enjoyed its work of destruction.

"Is it coming now?" asked the young mother, wistfully, to Michael; and when he answered her softly that he feared it was, she hid her eyes against the child, and quietly awaited her fate.

But, somehow, the Simoom righted herself again; and then Donald stumbled and groped his way back to Michael's side.

"Do let us get up upon deck," he said. "We can't do any good here, and I should hate to die like a rabbit in a hole, shouldn't you?"

"Yes; but I expect we should be washed away directly. I am afraid poor Captain Marsh is gone."

"Then let us follow him!" replied Donald, with exultation. "We can't follow a braver lead, can we?—and there will be some excitement to help one along. All these poor weeping women take the heart out of one, somehow!"

"And yet some of them are wonderfully brave, too," answered Michael, gently. "But lay hold on me, Donald, and let us keep together. Don't you hear how the timbers creak? We can't hold out more than a few minutes longer!"

"Heaven help us all!" said Donald. "It will be a sad Christmas in many homes, because—"

But his sentence was never finished.

As he and Michael set foot on the dismantled deck, there came a great rush of many waters, a wild shriek of despair from below, and then, with a shuddering lurch, the poor old Simoom turned over on her side, and went slowly down.

Donald clutched at a spar, and held on to it desperately, just as Michael floated past him on the crest of a huge wave, and then was whirled suddenly down out of sight.

A little later, the brothers were close together once more, and the moon, struggling through the dark clouds overhead, showed both their wan faces. So wonderfully alike were they, that one seemed like a repetition of the other, and you might have fancied you were the victim of a strange illusion.

The wind having spent its fury and done its foul work, began to abate now, and the moon came out full and strong, shining calmly on the spot where the Simoom had gone down with its living freight. A few floating spars, a dark figure here and there with its forlorn face upturned, were the only signs of the terrible tragedy that wouldadden so many hearts and darken so many homes that Christmas-tide.

"Thank Heaven, the storm is over!" said the captain of the Derwentwater, as he shook the spray out of his eyes and hair. "An hour ago, I wouldn't have given twopence for my chance of life, or yours either—eh, Benson?"

And he turned to the first mate, who had been close at his side all through the perils of the night, and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Look ahead!" he added, suddenly, in an excited tone. "There's a man overboard! Is it possible that he belongs to us?"

"I think not, for I asked just now if any one was missing, and they told me no. But if the Derwentwater has pulled through with such difficulty, there may have been other vessels not so seaworthy which did not pull through at all. There is certainly a man there, but he does not struggle or call out, though he ought certainly to see us by this time, and therefore I judge him to be dead."

"Anyhow, we will give the poor fellow a chance," replied Captain Lowe, who was a kind-hearted man, and moreover, was much softened by his close struggle with death that night; and he promptly gave the necessary orders.

In less than five minutes the drenched, lifeless figure was drawn onto the deck, and Captain Lowe knelt down beside it.

"It is strange how familiar the face seems to me!" he said, reflectively. "Where can I have seen it before? I don't believe the poor fellow is dead, though," he added, after scrutinizing the pale features with still more attention. "Run and fetch Dr. Dawson, somebody! I am sure I saw the eyelids move!"

Doctor Dawson had flung himself into his berth to get a little rest after the fatigue and excitement of the night, but he tumbled out again, and burrowed on deck.

"Why, good gracious!" as he examined the insensible man's features; "It is one of those young Pierpoints who went out with us last year! Didn't you recognize him again, Captain Lowe?"

"Yes; that's who it is!" returned Captain Lowe. "I knew the face so well, and yet I could not for the life of me remember the name. Which of the brothers is it, doctor, do you know?"

Doctor Dawson shook his head.

"I never knew which was which unless I saw them together. Although, let me see, this would be Michael, wouldn't it? Donald wore no whiskers. But he is just coming to, and will be able to answer the question himself in a few minutes, I hope, if we get him between some warm blankets, and give him a stiff glass of brandy-and-water."

But the jerk the sailors gave him in raising him brought the young man back to himself, and he opened his eyes with a puzzled, inquiring expression.

"Thank you, Captain Lowe," he said, with languid recognition. "Where is—"

"Your brother, Donald, you mean, don't you?" suggested Captain Lowe, as the other looked about him in a vague sort of way.

"Ah, yes; that's it. Where is Donald?"

"I am afraid I can't tell you. We saw you in the water, and picked you up; but there was no sign of your brother then. However, he may have been saved by some other ship."

Michael was so exhausted that he hardly seemed to hear, and yet there was a strange, frozen look on his face, as if some horror had overtaken him suddenly, which he had scarcely had time to realize. But after they had removed his wet clothes, and given him some stimulant, he slept heavily for a few hours; and then, although much depressed, was calm and composed, as he inquired if his poor brother had been found.

Unfortunately they had seen no sign of any of the unhappy passengers of the Simoom; and Captain Lowe gently represented to Michael that it was hopeless to expect it now, as they were at least fifty miles from the scene of the wreck, and running in the teeth of the wind.

"But it is just possible you may find him at Liverpool when you get there," added Captain Lowe, consolingly; "so you must keep up your spirits, Mr. Pierpoint. If all goes well we shall be in port the day after to-morrow, and then you will be able to make inquiries."

"That I will do, of course," replied Michael, sorrowfully; "but I am afraid there is no hope. If my brother had been saved at all, it would have been by you, for we were together just before you picked me up."

"When I saw you you were alone."

"I am afraid I was," he answered, sadly; "but one hopes against hope sometimes."

As they neared Southampton, and the other passengers became excited and joyful at the prospect of seeing those they loved, young Pierpoint seemed more depressed than ever. But, feeling himself no doubt to be a kill-joy, he kept out of the way, and did not court the contrast that was far more painful to himself than others.

He was entirely without money; but, guessing how it must needs be, Captain Lowe insisted upon being his banker for the moment, and Michael borrowed sufficient to purchase himself some clothes, and pay his journey to Ayshe.

He did not look much like a happy lover going to meet his mistress, as he took his seat in the train that was to bear him to Flora's side,

A BROTHER'S SIN.

His face was haggard and pinched; and, though once he had been wont to carry himself firmly, he stooped a good deal now, and had a nervous way of avoiding the sympathetic glances that traveled his way.

It was clear that his nerves had been greatly shattered, and that it would be some time before he recovered his former strength, even if he were ever quite the same again.

Even the thought of seeing Flora's sweet face brought no light into his eyes or smile to his lips, though he loved her with a love that was almost terrible in its passion and strength.

The short day had closed in when he reached Ayshe, and stumbled weakly out of the train.

He had been fasting all day, for he had no heart to eat, and the rush of memories that came upon him as he stood on the familiar platform were almost more than he could bear.

Feeling that he was quite at the mercy of these impressions while he was so faint, he forced himself to take some hot soup and drink a glass of wine before he stepped into the fly that was to convey him to his uncle's door; for he felt that he ought to report himself there before he went to Flora's, as the old man was particular about these little observances, and would have been hurt at anything that looked like neglect.

The young man was very pale when the carriage stopped—was it that he had a presentiment of the new trouble coming to him?—and he shook in every limb as he alighted from the vehicle.

He knew that every one was up, for there were lights in the down-stairs windows; but when he tried the door it was fastened, and his knock was answered by a woman whom he had never seen before.

He was making his way past her into the house, when she stopped him decidedly.

"You really can't go in, sir," she said, "for Mr. Pierpoint is only just dead, and there's no one to see you. Everything is in confusion. However, if your business is very particular, I could take up your name, and perhaps Mrs. Chester can tell you what to do."

She looked inquiringly at the young man, who staggered as if he had received a blow, and said, hoarsely, "I am Mr. Pierpoint's nephew, and did not even know that he was ill."

"Dear bless me! if I'd have known, I would have broke the news more gradual, sir—I would, indeed. But do step in, and I'll run upstairs, and tell Mrs. Chester you are here. What name shall I say, sir?"

"Michael Pierpoint," he answered, in a low voice as he passed in, and stood with a beating heart and blanched face waiting for Mrs. Chester to appear.

She came at last, with a slow, tired step, and stood for a minute opposite Michael without either speaking. Then she held out both hands, and said, affectionately, "I am so thankful you have come; but I wish it had been a few hours earlier. Your uncle asked for you so often up to the last. But come and take something before we talk of these things. You look quite worn out."

"I am worn out," he answered, with a dreary sigh. "I have had so much trouble lately."

And he told her of the shipwreck and his brother's sad end.

"Poor, poor Donald!" said Mrs. Chester, softly. "Flora will be dreadfully shocked and pained. But, thank Heaven, you were saved, for we could still less have spared you."

Then she told her story in turn, while Michael swallowed with difficulty a few mouthfuls of wine and bread. When she found that he could not really take more than this, she ceased to press him; and saying she thought Flora would be able to see him now, went away.

In a few minutes the girl herself came in, hesitated a little on the threshold, then came hurriedly forward into his outstretched arms.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with a sigh, "why did you look so much like Donald? I thought you were he for a moment."

"And now?" he asked eagerly, holding her at arm's length, without daring to embrace her.

"Now I know better, of course."

"My darling, your heart could not have deceived you so!" he murmured, rapturously.

CHAPTER VIII.

FACE TO FACE.

ONE month after Mr. Pierpoint's death, Michael and Flora were married very quietly at Ayshe.

As both needed an entire change, they settled to go abroad for some months; and meanwhile, their house was to be papered and painted, and newly furnished, under Mrs. Chester's superintendence.

This gave the elder lady occupation and interests, which caused her to miss Flora less than she had dared to hope. Still, she was very glad when they wrote to say that they were coming home; gladder still when the happy day arrived, and Michael lifted his young wife out of the carriage, and placed her in Mrs. Chester's arms, saying, laughingly, "I suppose I must try and be generous, as I have had her all to myself for nine months. I am afraid when she gets you alone, she will tell you dreadful tales of the way I have used her."

There was no mistaking the serene happiness that shone in Flora's eyes, as she turned them tenderly on her husband.

"I am afraid I shall have some dreadful tales to tell of the way you have spoilt me, Michael. Would you believe it, mamma, he actually bought me a thousand pounds' worth of diamonds as we came through Paris? I had never been quite cross with him before; but I was cross then, and scolded him very much. What do I want with diamonds—a happy woman like me?"

"I did not know that it was miserable women who looked best in diamonds," returned Michael. "But what a metamorphosis you have made here, mother!" he added, glancing about him with great satisfaction. "The place looks indeed like home now, doesn't it, Flora?"

"Delightfully so!" she answered; "and much as I have enjoyed our travels, it is very nice to be at home and all together again. We won't go away for a long time, will we Michael?"

"That will be just as you wish, love. All places are alike to me, so that we are together."

As the days went on, Mrs. Chester had the strongest and most convincing proofs of Flora's happiness. Michael was perfectly devoted to her, and she to him; and it was pretty to see with what chivalrous tenderness he regarded her, and how proud he was of her beauty.

The child that was born to them in November gave the last finishing touch to Flora's felicity; and she would say to her husband sometimes, with a very wistful smile, "Do you know, Michael, I tremble at my own good fortune? I have always noticed that when people are at the very height of prosperity, some great trouble is sure to come upon them suddenly."

He tried to laugh, but she noticed that he shrank, too, as if her words answered to some secret misgiving he had never dared express.

"My dear Flora, you are weak yet, and ready to fancy anything," he said, at last. "What have you done, an innocent child like you, that you should not be suffered to enjoy your life? I am different, and deserve to be punished!"

The frightened look in her large, soft eyes stopped him suddenly.

"Oh, Michael, I can't bear you to talk like that! What harm have you ever done?"

"My dear wife, I did not mean to scare you; but you could hardly expect that my life should be a clear white page like yours. Men have more temptations, and—and—"

"Don't go on," she exclaimed, with a sort of horror. "I know you don't mean anything

really, and have a habit of depreciating yourself; but you hurt me, for all that! If I could not respect as much as I love you, Michael, my heart would break."

"You foolish girl!" he said, stooping to kiss her. "I am no worse than the rest."

"That would not content me, Michael, for I want baby's papa to be a good deal better than the rest, of course. But I am not going to let you persuade me out of my faith in you. Mamma says the only fault you have is that you have too poor an opinion of yourself."

"I thought humility was a virtue, my love."

"Not when it is carried too far, sir."

"You see, Flora, I am so proud in one way that I am obliged to make up for it by extra humility in another. No one can accuse me of having too poor an opinion of my wife."

But when Flora was beginning to get more accustomed to this wonderful baby of hers, and had more time to observe her husband, she came to the conclusion that he was wofully changed. Not in his love for her, for that had grown almost exacting in its passionate intensity; but in his spirits and manner.

Sometimes he was recklessly gay, at others so depressed that all his wife's gentle art could not rouse him. And yet, when she questioned him, he would declare emphatically that he was quite well, and the happiest man alive.

At last Flora came to the conclusion that he was out of health, that his nervousness was purely physical, and urged him to go up to town, and consult a doctor.

One evening, indeed, he was so strange in his manner, that Flora became frightened, and putting her head down on his shoulder, she said, in her sweet, coaxing way, "You really must go to town, and consult Doctor Starch, Michael. I have been watching you for the last hour, and you have kept starting and turning round as if expecting somebody you were afraid to meet. Of course that is ridiculous, but it shows what a state your nerves must be in, that you could give such an impression; doesn't it, dear?"

"Of course any one would be nervous who was so perpetually watched," he answered, more sharply than he had ever spoken to her yet. "Every time I look up I catch your eye as a matter of course."

"Don't be cross with me for feeling anxious, Michael," she said, her eyes filling. "If I didn't love you so much I shouldn't notice these things."

He caught her in his arms, and almost crushed her against his breast.

"My darling—my darling! how could I speak to you in such a way! If you only knew all you would pity me. I mean I am afraid I am going to be ill. But what does it matter? We have had a happy year together, and whatever the future may hold in store for me I shall always have that to look back upon, sha'n't I? And yet if they were to part us, Flora, I should certainly die."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, clinging to him with a sort of terror. "Who should part us? Are we not man and wife?"

"Yes; but one never knows what may happen. You might choose to leave me, Flora."

"Now you are talking nonsense," she retorted, laughing. "Fancy my choosing to leave you!"

"Can't you imagine any circumstances that would make such a step possible, Flora?"

"No," she answered, unhesitatingly. "I cannot."

"Heaven bless you for that!" he exclaimed, and pressed her again and again to his heart.

The next morning when Flora awoke she found a little note on Michael's pillow telling her that he had gone up to town on business, and she was not to expect him home that night unless he telegraphed.

"How very odd for Michael to have business!" said Flora; and she went off to sleep again, smiling, for she had a notion that Michael's journey to town meant Christmas presents for baby and baby's mamma.

He did not return that night, and the next morning she had a few hurried but affection-

ate lines telling her he should not be able to get away until the end of the week, but that, whatever happened, he would be back by Christmas Eve, as it was an anniversary so dear to them both.

Flora was obliged to be satisfied with this promise, although she felt so utterly forlorn without Michael that she was ready to cry every time she glanced at his empty chair.

Even her mother, dearly as Flora loved her, could not fill up the void, for Michael had accustomed her to such exclusive attention that she missed him every hour.

"Oh, I am so glad he is coming home!" she said, with a sigh of relief, as she lifted her husband's last letter to her lips. "Don't laugh at me, mamma, but I do feel as if I were incomplete mentally and physically without Michael, he is so much the best part of myself."

Mrs. Chester had come to rejoice in this happy union, for Michael had kept his word faithfully, and she had gained a son without losing her daughter; so the good lady answered, frankly and freely, "I wouldn't laugh for the world, my love. At the same time, I must be allowed to say that I have not noticed any deficiencies in you since your husband left."

"Because I have tried to keep them in the background, I suppose. But I am very lost without him."

"I don't wonder at that. I have missed him very much myself. However, we shall have him for Christmas, my dear; and there is one thing certain—Michael has not stayed away for his own pleasure."

"Oh, no! He says his heart has been at home all the while," replied Flora, smiling.

And who could doubt that this was true when the young man came back that night and gathered his wife into his arms with a yearning tenderness that seemed too deep for words? But when the flush of excitement had died out of his cheeks Flora began to feel anxious again, he looked so haggard and worn. But he was quite well, he said, and Doctor Starch had declined to accept him for a patient, on the plea that there was nothing the matter with him.

"So you must give up trying to make an invalid of me, my love," he concluded, gayly, "although I can see that you are longing to coddle me."

Flora laughed; but was not convinced, for all that; and several times in the night she awoke trembling with the sense of some great weight on her mind—the shadow that a coming trouble casts before it with sensitive people.

But she was as easily reassured as frightened; and as Michael seemed cheerful the next day, she put on a bright face herself, and tried to smother the cruel misgivings that kept knocking at her heart like importunate beggars clamorous for relief.

Would any of them ever forget that Christmas Eve so long as life endured?

After dinner they sat over the fire, and talked until the chimes began to ring out, and then Flora crept closer to her husband, and laid her head down on his breast, saying, softly: "Do you remember, dear? We were very happy then, were we not? But not so happy as now."

"Not so happy as now," he repeated, in a dull mechanical way, and turned his head furtively to listen, not to the chimes, but to a slow, heavy step on the gravel path coming nearer and nearer.

"In some ways you are altered since then," Flora went on, dreamily, her eyes fixed on the fire. "You are graver, Michael."

"I have had sorrows," he answered. "People cannot suffer as I have suffered and be quite the same, unless they are very shallow-hearted."

"I know that, dear; but in little ways one cannot account for, you are so changed. Tonight when you were singing it sounded so like Donald's voice, I quite started. You always used to have a tenor."

"And what have I now?" he asked, shuddering.

"A base, of course. Don't you notice it yourself?"

"My throat has never been strong since the shipwreck, and that makes me hoarse, I dare say," he said, taking up the poker, and beginning to smite the coals. "If my heart is not changed, what matters the rest?"

"I didn't mean that it did matter, Michael; quite the contrary. I am always glad when you remind me of poor Donald, for I should not like to feel that happiness had made me forgetful."

"And you think that I have forgotten my brother, Flora?"

"No, Michael; I could not think that."

"No, indeed, for he is in my thoughts morning, noon and night; until sometimes, in spite of your love and its infinite preciousness, I should be thankful to die."

He spoke vehemently, so that Mrs. Chester roused suddenly from her nap in a fright, and asked if any thing were the matter with baby.

"I hope not," returned Flora, smiling; "but as she is awake, I will go and bring her down just for a minute. Our party seems incomplete without her, doesn't it? And I am sure she will enjoy the chimes."

"Being a young lady of such extraordinary intelligence!" put in Michael, with assumed gayety, as he opened the door for his wife.

The young mother returned presently carrying her bundle of lace and flannel as proudly as if it contained the only baby in the world; and, being seated close to the fire, she uncovered the little mottled face, and called upon Michael to wonder and admire.

"It was a pretty home scene, and a luxurious one besides; for, when people have taste as well as means, there is very little they cannot accomplish.

Flora, seated on the bright hearth-rug, attracted your attention first of all, for the fire-light seemed actually to revel in the sunny folds of her hair, showing the perfect complexion, and deep, soft eyes, the clearly-penciled brows, and sweet smiling mouth in their full beauty.

Michael was handsome, too, broad-shouldered and manly-looking; and Mrs. Chester, with her fine but faded face and stately figure, made a charming background for the picture of young married love.

As Michael leant lovingly over his wife's chair, caressing his child, how little he guessed of the haggard, eager eyes at the window watching his every movement with jealous rage.

This man had journeyed many a weary mile, you could see, for his clothes were travel-stained and worn, his shoes dropping to pieces on his feet.

The hollow eyes and gaunt features told their tale of cruel suffering and privation; and, as he leaned against the window, you could see that he actually needed the support to keep him from falling. It seemed as if some strange fascination held him rooted to the spot, for, though the sight appeared to torture him, he did not stir. A gleam of almost fierce passion flashed into his eyes when the young husband drew his wife back against him, and kissed her long and tenderly.

"Scoundrel!" he muttered in his beard, and dragged himself along to the front door, which he opened without ceremony, and passed into the house.

He seemed to know the place, and yet he looked about him with a certain surprise, as if he noticed some change. He stood for a minute warming himself beside the huge log fire; then softly opened a door on his right, and peeped in.

It was much the same scene as before, only that Mrs. Chester was composing herself for another nap; and, therefore, the young couple were able to converse more at their ease. Flora had slipped onto a low stool, with the child still in her arms, and was leaning against her husband's knees, while his face, so white

and troubled an hour ago, had brightened into a sort of passionate determination, as if he were defying Fate to hustle him off his vantage-ground—he so prosperous and so beloved.

The next moment he looked up; and there before him, standing motionless, with haggard eyes fixing his, was the specter of another Michael, which was not himself.

CHAPTER IX.

"TO ERR IS HUMAN—TO FORGIVE DIVINE."

FLORA was toying with the baby's dimpled hands, seeing nothing for the moment; but, feeling her support totter and give way, she, too, looked up, and uttered a stifled cry so full of terror, that Mrs. Chester ran to her, and stopped short, gasping, horror-stricken, faint with a strange fear.

The new-comer still remained motionless; but when Flora put out her hand imploringly, he moved ever so little that she might touch him, and prove that he was no specter, but a human being like herself.

"Michael," she said, in a voice of deepest anguish, "is it you?"

He smiled with fine disdain.

"I don't wonder at your asking. I am wofully changed, am I not, from the happy lover who pressed your lips just two years ago in a rapture of thankfulness for the sweet promise they had just given? I see see that myself, and almost cease to wonder that you preferred the brother who was present and prosperous to the poor, broken-down man, whom sickness and separation had reduced to a mere shadow of his former self. And yet, faithless as you are, you dare not deny me, now that we are face to face. I am Michael, and that man at your side—your husband, the father of your child—is not Michael, though you have suffered him to take my name and my rights."

Flora stared at him with her lips apart, and the terror in her eyes deepening.

"What does it all mean, mother?" she said, at last, turning imploringly to Mrs. Chester; "do help me to understand! This is Michael—you see that, don't you, now? And yet—and yet it is too terrible! I shall go mad! What have I done that he should reproach me? I thought my husband was Michael; so did you. Speak, some one! What does it mean?"

Mrs. Chester took the child from her daughter's trembling arms, and laid it on the couch. Then she went back to Flora, and took her hand.

"It means, my poor child," she said, with tender compassion, "that you have been grossly deceived. Let Donald Pierpoint answer to his brother for the sin he has committed—you are as innocent as the babe yonder. Speak, sir, and explain all this!" she concluded, turning with a haughty, imperious gesture to the miserable man, who looked as if he would fain have crouched down out of sight. "I will not suffer my daughter to be wrongfully accused!"

"What is there to explain?" said Donald, standing at bay like a hunted animal. "I loved your daughter wildly, passionately, despairingly, and had but one chance of winning her. Michael was dead, as I believed, and I took his place."

"False! false!" exclaimed Michael, fiercely. "You knew that I was alive a month after the shipwreck, for I asked the good woman who had taken me in to write to you at Ayshe, knowing that if you had been saved a letter addressed here must reach you eventually. I was at death's door even then, and did not leave my bed until months later; but at any rate, I was alive, and you knew it!"

"The letter of which you speak I received on my wedding morning," answered Donald, hoarsely. "But I swear to you that I broke not the seal until the next day; then there was nothing for it but to go on as I had begun—"

"And pray that I might die off out of your way, I suppose?" put in Michael, with sorrowful bitterness.

"I have never prayed at all since that night of the wreck—how could I? for my sin was

very sweet to me, even while I suffered. But I did think you were dead when no word came from you for eight months, and, Heaven forgive me! it seemed almost better so."

"Better for you—I can understand that; dead men tell no tales. Besides, you were happy, and what mattered the rest?"

"I was not happy. The thought of you, and the knowledge of my sin, was like poison in my cup, and I could not be alone a minute that your face did not rise up before me like a specter. Many a night I have awoken in horror, though the wife I had sinned for was sleeping on my breast; and yet to keep her I would have sinned still more deeply, for my love for you, great as it had once been, was as nothing in comparison with my love for her, and though she will hate me now, I must needs be something in her life by reason of this happy year we have passed together, and because I am the father of her child."

A flush passed over Michael's wan features, and he set his teeth sharply together.

"Won't she remember also?" he said, "that you bought those privileges by a cruel, wicked fraud?"

"May be; but women pardon a good deal that is done for love of them."

He hazarded one glance at his wife as he said this, but her face was hidden on her mother's bosom, and he saw, by the convulsive movement of her shoulders, that she was crying. But could he fail to remember the words she had spoken a few days ago?—that if she could not respect her husband as much as she loved him, her heart would break?

"Yes," returned Michael, sternly; "women do pardon a good deal in the man who loves them; but Flora is changed, indeed, if she could care for a traitor—a man who has been living a lie all this while, shamelessly, pitilessly."

"I am sure you do not believe that, Michael," said his brother, brokenly. "I have sinned abominably, and made no effort to extenuate my fault or find excuses for it; but that I have been without shame or pity is untrue, for I have suffered fearfully this last year."

"And yet you would not have made restitution even if you had been able."

"I would not have given up my wife, if that is what you mean. She is all the dearer to me, perhaps, that I suffered so much through her. Now, if she leaves me I cannot help it—would that I could; but at any rate, she will be my wife while I live, my widow when I die!"

The passion, the fierce determination of his voice and eyes as he said this, made even Mrs. Chester glance at him with a sort of pity. She could not believe that her daughter would ever care for her husband again, and yet he had given up his hopes of heaven for her love.

Mrs. Chester's heart sunk when she thought of the many complications that might be brought about by one man's sin; but her chief sympathy, as may well be supposed, was with Michael, who had been so cruelly betrayed by the brother whom he had loved so dearly.

Putting Flora on the sofa beside her child, she went and sat down by Michael, and took his poor, wasted hand affectionately in hers.

"You must try to bear up, my poor Michael!" she said. "You have one comfort, at least, for you know, now, that Flora was never untrue to you, do you not?"

"Yes," he replied, with the calmness of despair; "but small the consolation, since she is lost to me, for all that, and I have begged my way back to her."

"Why was that necessary?"

"Well, I had no way of proving my identity, and, therefore of obtaining money. I was picked up by a small trading vessel, outward bound, and when I recovered consciousness found myself at a South African port, without a farthing in the world. A kind Christian lady there offered to shelter me until I could communicate with my friends; and it was from there I wrote the letter which reached Ayshe on Flora's wedding-day."

"And it was never answered?"

"Never, to my knowledge, nor any subse-

quent letter that I wrote either to Donald or Flora. I understand, now, why it happened so in Flora's case—of course those letters were not allowed to reach her."

"What was the use?" answered Donald, in a dogged sort of way. "We could not have changed any thing then, and it was better for her that she should be ignorant. And afterward, until a week ago, I thought you dead."

"I took the fever of the country, and it lingered about me for months, bringing me to death's door again and again, and yet leaving me just alive, and that was all. My mind was so strangely confused all this while that I could not often remember my own name; and when my kind nurse offered to write to you for me, I became so violently agitated with the effort of memory this entailed that she was forced to desist. At last I rallied a little, and then my indefatigable friend managed somehow to get me a passage home, and I set sail for England. I had just two shillings in my pocket and a change of linen when I arrived at Southampton, but I wrote at once to my solicitors in London, telling them of the plight I was in, and begging they would let me have a remittance, promising to explain matters more fully when I saw them. To this letter, I received no answer, naturally, for they thought I was an impostor; and then I tried Ayshe again, for I had a feeling that Donald must be alive, although I could not account for his silence. You know the rest—you also know what I saw when I dragged myself to my uncle's old home, and looked through the window. I suppose if I had been a hero I should have crept silently away, and died like a dog in a ditch—nameless, unknown, and left them to enjoy their paradise undisturbed. Perhaps if I had known that Flora was innocent of any wrong, and yet would have the worst of the suffering, I might have found the courage, for I loved her always better than myself; but, believing that she had been unfaithful to me, I longed, at whatever cost to myself, to confound and rebuke her."

Flora, rocking her child on her bosom, looked over at him, and smiled.

"Oh, Michael! you must have felt in your heart that I never could be unfaithful! What were earthly vows worth if I were not true? It was Michael Pierpoint I meant to marry, and believed my husband to be until a few minutes ago. Judge between Donald and me—it is your right; and whatever you bid me that will I do, I swear it!"

A flush of triumph and joy brightened Michael's wan countenance, and lent a sudden brightness to his eyes, while Donald covered his miserable face and groaned with anguish.

"Flora," he said in a hoarse whisper, "remember the child, and, for her sake, do no wrong, I beseech you! You have only to speak the word, and I will never trouble you again on this side the grave, but do not throw me on my brother's mercy. Let your heart decide the question, and, whatever that dictates, I will abide by faithfully unto the end."

She did not so much as glance his way as she answered, "I have elected Michael to judge between us. He will tell me what I ought to do."

Donald cowered back into the first seat at hand, and waited. Michael looked from one to the other, and a wild struggle raged in his breast.

At last he said, in a constrained voice, "I cannot trust myself to-night; my mind is weakened by pain and fasting. Give me food, and let me have the rest I so greatly need, and tomorrow we will speak of all this again."

Giving the child to her mother, Flora rushed off to fetch Michael a glass of wine, and order the guest-chamber to be made ready for him.

To tend on him with a sister's devotion, and nurse him back to health and strength, was her one thought and aspiration. Beyond that she dared not look. Donald had blasted her whole future by his unholy fraud.

Now that she saw the two brothers together, she wondered how she could have been so deceived. Haggard and worn as Michael was,

she had recognized him at once; whereas, without mistrusting her husband, she had sometimes wonderingly asked herself why he was so much more like Donald the last year than he had ever been before.

His voice had startled her strangely the first time he sung; and perhaps, if some one had hinted a doubt, Flora would have had a sudden divination of the truth. But no one had, and it seemed too painfully impossible to come of its own accord into an innocent mind like hers.

Michael seemed so feeble and exhausted by the time that he had reached his room, that Mrs. Chester was very seriously alarmed, and would have sent for a doctor, only that he begged her to wait until the morning.

"I am only weary," he said, "and rest will restore me. After having weathered so many storms, it would be inglorious to sink in a calm, would it not? Besides, my work in this world is not quite done," he concluded, looking at her with strange, wistful, eager eyes. "I must make Flora happy before I go."

"Shall I tell you how to make Flora happy, Michael?"

He glanced at her inquiringly.

"Get quite well and strong, my dear."

"Poor child! how little she must understand me if that would make her happy. There are times when the only possible way out of your difficulties is to die."

"Yes; but that time is not come for you, Michael, and never will. It is not men like you, who have had great sorrows and disappointments, who do such noble work in the world; and you are not alone, remember!" she added, emphatically. "With me for a mother, and Flora for your sister and friend, you may, surely, be happy, as well as useful!"

He shook his head with a mournful smile.

"Is it possible that I should ever be happy again? But go down to Flora, Mrs. Chester; she wants you, poor child, more than I do; and tell her that my last prayer to-night, as it has been for two years past, will be for her."

Mrs. Chester could not sleep that night. She was haunted by fears and misgivings.

Flora had stolen into her bed with the child in her arms, and lay there through long hours shivering, with her eyes wide awake and troubled.

"Let me stay here now," she pleaded. "Michael will tell me what to do to-morrow. I think he will want me to go home to you again; and you will take me, won't you? And yet I suppose it is very weak of me, but I cannot help pitying Donald. It must be so terrible to have your sin found out and to lose all that you have sinned for. And," lowering her voice, "he was very good to me, mamma."

She listened for a moment to the persistent, weary step overhead, telling how Donald was getting through the miserable hours; and then added, with a sob, "I hated him an hour ago, but you see he is baby's father, and—and—"

She broke off, crying, and buried her face in the pillow.

Mrs. Chester bent over her, and kissed her cheek, saying, gently, "You need not be ashamed of forgiving, Flora; and, perhaps, after all, that is what Michael will bid you do."

"I think not—how could he? And I am afraid—at least, I am not sure that I really wish it. I have had such a terrible shock that nothing seems real to me now, and I do not feel as if I had the courage to take up my life again. I shall be worse than a widow, mamma, because, if my husband had died while I loved and trusted him, I should have been able to look forward to our meeting in heaven. Now I have nothing to look forward to; nothing, save life-long misery."

"And the child?" said Mrs. Chester, reproachfully.

"You know I love her very dearly, mamma; but think how sad to have her growing up without a father's care; and then there is all the responsibility, too. I know you will help me, mamma, but I haven't heart for the task. Unfortunately, Donald made himself so neces-

sary to me in every way, that now I sha'n't know how to live without him."

It was in Mrs. Chester's heart to say "Don't try," for to forgive Donald seemed, after all, the easiest way out of the difficulty. But she restrained herself, remembering that Flora had chosen Michael as the arbiter, and was now bound to abide by his decision.

And, remembering Michael's wrongs and sufferings, her heart misgave her.

How could he ever bear to see Flora consoled, even happy, perhaps, with the man who had robbed him of the woman who had been dearer to him than life?"

He had a generous spirit, she knew; still he was but human, and Donald had been very pitiless to him, preferring that his brother should starve rather than have the chance of coming forward to denounce him.

Of course, if Donald committed the sin and meant to continue in it, he was forced to take all kinds of precautions to ward off detection, and all those unanswered letters were just a natural consequence of the original fault; but they seemed to Michael so many witnesses against his brother, and hardened his heart against the delinquent.

But who shall say what softer thoughts came to him as he lay a feeble, broken-down man under the roof that had sheltered him so often as a boy?

To rest was all he needed—he did not want to sleep; and when, through the dead stillness of the winter night, came the sweet voices of the waits singing of

"Peace on earth, and mercy mild," he smothered his face against the pillow, and wept and groaned in his agony.

Mrs. Chester was painfully shocked and startled when she saw Michael in the full morning light; and, without consulting him, sent off for the old doctor who had attended him in a good many of his childish ailments.

To her surprise, Michael, rousing from a sort of stupor as the other entered, said, with solemn gravity: "Thank you for coming to bid me good-by. I am greatly consoled to know that there are now but a few hours between myself and eternity."

Mrs. Chester went away, and left them alone together, but very soon Michael sent for her, and they had a long, confidential talk. Michael had written down his wishes with regard to his property (all of which he had left unconditionally to Flora); and once signed and witnessed, this paper answered the purpose intended as well as a more elaborate document.

Flora sat by him all the day, and several times Donald stole to the door, as if he longed to enter and dared not. His sin had indeed found him out, and no one could fail to see at a glance the change wrought by that one night of anguish and remorse.

His eyes were sunken, his face haggard, while his lips twitched convulsively.

When any one came by he disappeared into his room again, but seemed touched almost to tears when Mrs. Chester followed him, and said, "You must come down and take something, Donald. There is no need to let the whole world into our sorrowful secret, and the servants will wonder what makes their master behave so strangely."

"I will do whatever you wish," he answered bravely; but though he went down with her, she could not persuade him to take even a glass of wine.

"Why do you trouble about me?" he said. "You know I do not deserve it."

Before she could answer him, Flora rushed in with a terrified face, crying breathlessly, as she touched her husband's arm, "Come at once—Michael has asked for you! Come, if you would see him once again alive!"

By an agitated gesture she invited Mrs. Chester to follow, and then darted up-stairs, looking back once to see if Donald were behind.

With bowed head, shame-stricken, sorrowful, a humble penitent before the brother he had wronged, Donald entered the sick-chamber,

and slowly and tremblingly approached the bed.

Michael opened his eyes full on him, with the tenderness of old days in their dim depths; then held out his almost transparent hand to his brother.

Donald knelt down, and pressed it reverently to his quivering lips.

Smiling, Michael motioned to Flora, placed her hand, unresisting, in Donald's, and saying, faintly, "Forgive him, dear, for my sake; it is my last earthly wish," fell back on the pillow, and still smiling, died.

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